THE CANONICAL ADVENTURES OF JACK & CHARLIE

VOLUME I

I.C.G.A.

THE CANONICAL

ADVENTURES OF JACK AND CHARLIE,

VOLUME I.

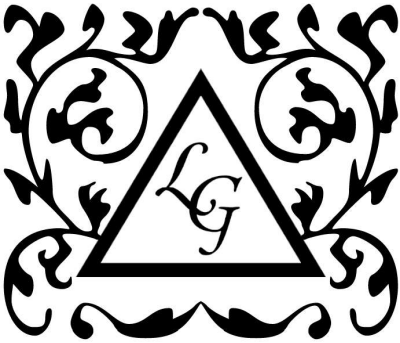
Being a collection of several narratives,

CONCERNING THE EXPLOITS OF THE TWO
titular characters. Produced by the

PROVIDENCE
OF THE VERY ṬING,

and several I.C.G.A. associates. Namely:
Sn. SAP and Sn. Sherm.

Presented in no specific order, and containing some
works previously published in the The
Goofiíśt Encyclicals.



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Edited and Crypto-Updated by
Sn. Sherm &c.

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PREFACE TO THE FIRST VOLUME OF THE CANONICAL ADVENTURES OF JACK & CHARLIE.

WRITTEN BY SN. SAP.

THE KEEN READER will notice that all the tales detailing the exploits of *Jack and Charlie* were produced by the *Providence of the Very Ṭing* and co-authored by myself and others. I do not care to explain what that means, and what's more, I find it the idea that I should,—*offensive.* I am not your father, go ask someone else your questions. Furthermore, the fact that you are reading this far, clearly demonstrates the lack of respect you have for your own time, or for tradition, as you are reading prefaces to works of fiction,—if, indeed, these works can be named as such, to which I say: *Thank the creator, blessed be he, for not making me your father,* for I could not bear to write another word, so great would my disappointment be. In fact, the truly keen reader would understand, and move on. You, reader, who continues to read these words, are not keen, you are starved of information. To this I say: do I look like a chef to you? I invite the truly keen reader to flip, scroll down, fast forward, and draw his own conclusions regarding the nature of our our eponymous, even titular, characters. But to those that are afflicted by brain diseases with funny acronyms,—I suppose it is my duty to give some context, and perhaps some insight, even though deontology goes against my religion, I will make this sacrifice, and with this I tell you, dear reader, read on, it's in the name dāwg, sensu stricto.

THE CANONICAL
ADVENTURES OF JACK & CHARLIE.
CONSISTING OF XXV CHAPTERS.

QVOD DEVS BENE VERTAT.

The Canonical Adventures of Jack and Charlie. Cap. I.

A Cold miasma dominated the room.

"Shut up Charlie!" Cried the marvelous creature that sat in the corner, watching him, "shut up Charlie! I've got a plan! You'll like it, I promise!" And the mummy did something almoſt human: He ſtretched out a withered, bony hand, to his almoſt... *almoſt* human friend.

"Call me Jack," he said.

"What's the plan?" Asked Charlie.

"Firſt, I need a gun," explained Jack.

"A gun? You want a gun? You got a gun?"

"It's sitting right on the table there," said Charlie.

"Oh, no..." Said Jack.

"I don't want that. I need something bigger."

"Like what?"

"A cannon... That way, the music doesn't go out of the room, but... well, there you go."

"Oooo!" Muttered Charlie, "a cannon! That's juſt what I was going to say! That's juſt what I was going to say!"

"Shut up," said Jack.

"If I don't get a gun, I'm going to ſtart killing."

"What? Murdering? You mean, like, shooting the thing in the head?"

"Yup. So, there's this hole in the ceiling, you see. An empty, dirty hole. I think if I'd cleaned it out, I wouldn't need the can-

non, but the kid said he was going to take a shower after you two broke the fifth egg. But he never did, so I put the egg there, and I stuck a broom in it and I shut the door. Now, after he leaves, I'm going to throw the egg down there."

"But why?" Asked Charlie, "why are you going to do that?"

"Because it's funny. Because it's so messed up, you know? Like, he's going to have to stick his dick down that hole or die."

"Oh, yeah, and that's why you want a cannon, is it?"

"No, Charlie, that's why I want a cannon."

"Oh," Jack rolled his eyes, "you sure, Charlie? You sure that's why you want a cannon?"

"I mean, I know it's ridiculous, Jack, but it's not, not really. It's just like... if I were a chimpanzee, I'd like to have a cannon. You know? Because chimps, they really do a lot of stupid things. So, a cannon's sort of like... you know, like adding stupid to something stupid."

"Just like you, Charlie," said Jack.

"Yes, yes, just like you," Charlie answered.

"Anyway, that's the only reason I want a cannon. Now, the only way you're ever going to get a cannon is if you can find one that'll shoot other things. Don't you worry, Jack, I've got something big to hide."

And, at that moment, the two of them burst into laughter. Jack and Charlie didn't laugh often, in fact, they didn't laugh at all, but each of them was smiling because they both knew exactly what the other was thinking. And because neither of them had ever been exactly certain how the other was feeling. And also because they'd forgotten about the thing that was behind them. It wasn't hard to make a mockery of it, because it had nothing to laugh at. It was no longer living, but that was about the best that any human could hope for. It was still going to die, but that was what they were there for, wasn't it? Or at least that's what they thought they were there for.

Jack began the search: First, he checked under the couch, the flashlight that had burned out when the closet exploded was still lying there, leftovers from the "magic-light days." Jack

didn't even remember where they'd gotten it. There were several bullets in the desk drawer, most of them with names written on them in a black Sharpie. The drawer was full of plastic water bottles, which Jack ignored. Then there were the books, Jack went through all of them: The fourth, fifth, and sixth were the most interesting. All of the books seemed to have been written by the same author. The first was called "Murder," and was about... it was about... Jack wasn't really sure what it was about, but it wasn't what he wanted. The next book was called "I killed a Man on Sunday Morning, a Picture of Daniel," and it was about... well, Jack wasn't sure what it was about, but it was, he thought, probably about sex. The seventh book was a collection of short stories, with titles like "A Serial Murderer's Diary, Dear Diary-Reader, for God's Sake, What's going on?" And "Ray Danny Plays a Jaguar."

Jack had always loved mysteries, but the things in these books were never as interesting as the names. This one had a painting of a guy in a tan suit reading the papers. This one had a guy with blond hair, reading. This one had a guy with white hair, reading. The weird thing about these books was that all of the mysteries were solved by page two, or even page one. The first guy got his head chopped off in the second chapter. In the third chapter a woman got her neck cut. The fourth chapter had a guy getting his head chopped off. The last one had a guy getting his head chopped off, and it took him five pages to get there. Jack had tried it with magic. He had read the book called "Diary of a Murderer," and it had said that the guy with blond hair was stabbed with a knitting needle, which was why he had a bald spot on his head, which wasn't surprising, since the guy was reading a diary. What was surprising was the fact that the guy with white hair wasn't stabbed at all. Jack had tried the book where a guy gets his head chopped off. It said that he was killed by a lawn mower, which was why he was bald. That didn't fit. He hadn't seen a lawn mower. He had just seen the guy with blond hair which still didn't make sense.

Charlie snorted quizzically: "Must have a hell of a circular logic, detective." He began to sputter.

"I mean, I killed a guy on Sunday morning, and he turns up in the next book? That doesn't make any sense!"

"Tell that to the guy with blond hair who got his head chopped off."

"What? Who?"

"What guy?" Jack asked blankly.

He looked around, Charlie was gone.

"He's not around, is he?"

He looked around. The garage door was closed. Jack could hear the wipers on his Volkswagen. He had to go to bed and try this again tomorrow. If this book was what he thought it was, could it lead to another egg?

Charlie appeared again. He had rumpled his blue flannel shirt and rubbed his bald head.

"You okay?" Jack asked.

"Yeah, just trying to figure a few things out... No big deal, Jack. This is a really terrific world."

They stood and stared at each other.

Finally, Jack spoke up, saying:

"First, you'll be ready, you'll buy me a little, little room, or I'll buy you a lot of room, whatever you can't give me."

"What do you want?"

"Just get me out of here," said Jack, "and you'll be rewarded, but you'll have to do something for me in the meantime."

"Okay," said Charlie.

He went outside. It was still dark, but with the moonlight and the river, the dark itself was a kind of silvery dark now, and the faces of the buildings twinkled more than they had in the middle of the day. He could hear cars moving and honking all around him. He walked to the bus stop and took the bus to Grosvenor Square. There, he checked in the Times newspaper for the most recent auction notices. He made the requisite phone calls to two men he knew in the art world, and then he walked the twenty-five blocks or so to the auction house, where

he bought the smallest and most run-down of the two rooms. The broker opened the door and walked in with him.

"You paid too much," he said.

Charlie nodded:

"Yeah, but it's got room for two," he pulled out his wallet and gave the man one hundred pounds, "I'll be right back," he said, and he ran down the hallway to the room.

The broker followed.

"Jack, can you do a deal with the building manager?"

"Yeah mate, I'll do a deal. Give me an hour."

He walked into the next room and pulled out a five-pound note and inserted it into a slot in the wall. The numbers 7 and 7 started to flash. He glanced at his watch, It was 8:45. He looked at the broker, who shrugged. The two of them walked out into the corridor and Charlie gestured at the room.

"Take that one," he said.

"There's some money in the bank, if you have to break a sweat. I'll get you the money for the second one tomorrow morning."

The broker looked at the room.

"This isn't exactly a room, is it?" He said.

Charlie laughed.

"This is the size of a closet, mate. We'll both be happy with the first one. This one's got some bollocks in it. This is some fucked-up art dealer."

He nodded and went back down to the lobby. As he entered the lobby, he looked at the two patrolmen, who were watching the front entrance. They were close to falling asleep.

"Jack, you want me to come with you, to keep you from getting into trouble?"

"I'm fine, thanks."

Jack went back to his office, and he opened a desk drawer and took out a special cigar box. Inside was a nice new Beretta and three boxes of bullets. He took out the gun and put it in his coat pocket. He took the extra bills out of his wallet and stuffed them into the cigar box. He walked down the hallway and en-

tered the next room. It was a little more expensive, although not much. He held the Beretta in his hand. No way could he give that to the building manager. He took out the bullets, put one in the Beretta, and put the box back into his pocket. He got on the phone, called another broker, and a room was booked for the next two days at a hotel in Piccadilly.

Charlie was in the room next door. Jack made a bottle of whiskey, an old favorite. He felt good and the whiskey tasted good, and when he had finished it, he stood in front of the bathroom mirror and looked at himself. In the mirror, he saw a fifty-year-old man with a well-kept beard and a body that had lost some muscle mass. But he saw himself with clear eyes. He looked like himself. He had always had clear eyes. Maybe he was too young for Jack, but it seemed that he was a little ahead of the game. He would start his own practice soon. There would be no going back. He was just barely keeping himself afloat. He ran the water in the sink and looked into the mirror. He splashed water on his face, and the water felt good. He stared at himself and wished he was twenty years younger. No way was he going back. He heard a knock. It was Charlie.

"Go away."

"Come on, it's for me."

"I don't want any Scotch."

"You'll like this Scotch. It's in a special, secret cabinet. Only people with permission to come in here can open it."

"I don't want Scotch."

"Come on, you know you'll like it."

"I don't want Scotch."

"Come on, you're only thirty. What's wrong with you? Here, have a taste, it'll make you feel better, try it."

Jack stood and looked into the mirror, and he said, "Okay."

Charlie held out the bottle, and Jack took it.

He took a couple of swallows, then put the bottle back in Charlie's hand.

He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"You didn't like it, did you?" Charlie said.

"Yeah, it's okay," Jack replied, "so, you come on up here and keep me company?"

Charlie nodded, smiled, and said:

"Yeah, yeah... Come on up."

Jack took one more drink and came upstairs. The room was nicely done up, it was one of those hotels that had old musty walls, high ceilings, and heavy furniture. It was actually a pretty comfortable room. There was an old wooden desk and two chairs in the corner, with a couple of windows in front of them. There was a heavy dark carpet on the floor and an old-fashioned table with an ugly lamp on it, which wasn't even plugged in.

Charlie took the bottle out of Jack's hand and held it. He stood there, staring at it.

"You don't drink much, do you?" Jack said.

"Yeah, I'm kind of a lightweight."

He poured Jack a drink. Jack took a couple of sips. He went into the bathroom. He stood in front of the mirror and looked at himself. He ran his hand over his face. He'd let it go a little too long without shaving. He looked at himself through the mirror, and the reflection looked pretty good. And he thought: "Wow, I look good for a guy my age."

There was another knock on the door. Jack went into the bedroom and got a second bottle, and opened it. Charlie came in, holding the bottle.

Jack nodded at him:

"Is that mead?"

Charlie nodded: "Here."

"Smells good," said Jack.

"Does it?"

"I didn't know you drank that stuff."

"I drink everything."

"Aye, that's right. You're a good drinker. I bet you could get someone to buy you a car."

"I don't want a car."

"You're only thirty, and you've got that look."

"That look?"

"Yes, you know, *that look,* that you are a man who's doing things on his own."

"Yeah, I guess I am."

"There was no one around to give you a message. You had to go to the mainland to give one. That's something you'd need to get used to. You're going to be a good private eye."

"I don't want to be a private eye."

"Sure you do. You want to eye people's privates."

"I don't want to do that."

"Don't tell me, you want to snoop around and take pictures of private parts. Those pictures, you'll hang on your wall, right there, in your bedroom."

"No, I don't want to take pictures of people's privates."

"Yeah, right, you'll have to start doing that."

"No, I won't."

"Yes, you will, it's a profession, Jack."

"A profession? Oh, right..."

Jack put the bottle down.

He came over to the bed and sat down.

"Are you going to sleep over?" Charlie said.

"Why not?"

"What about the bottle?"

"Don't worry about it. The bottle can wait."

"I'm not worried about it."

"I know you aren't."

"You're alright, you know that?" Jack shook his head.

"I'll wait here, if you want."

"Oh, I want. I want very much."

Jack watched Charlie move over to the bed and settle down.

"Can I get you anything?"

"No, thanks."

"You don't need to pay me for this."

"No, no. I was glad to do it. I was happy."

Jack took off his own shoes and laid down. He was asleep before Charlie got back. His head hit the pillow, but not quite before he heard him say: "Bastard..."

X. OF JACK AND CHARLIE.

The wind died down in the night, and after a while, the wind howled and the room grew cold. Charlie lay awake in the night, worried about the wind, and about the pile of ſtones that had been blown across the road.

"Jack's not here," he thought, "it'll be dark soon, and then the evil things will come, and Jack won't be able to see them coming, or protect himself."

The ſtorm kept Jack alive, and Charlie wasn't afraid of Jack, not anymore. Jack wasn't that person, Jack was the person who could hear the wind and be silent, and Charlie was the person who could talk to the wind and not hear anything at all, and then he would hear the screaming in his head and feel sick and tired, juſt like everyone else. He was sure that the ſtorm had saved him. Every time he'd had a nervous breakdown,—he'd had the ſtorm.

The Thames always drew in the prettieſt lasses, and Charlie was always waiting for them. Jack didn't really care all that much for the trade, but it made his days very pleasant. As was Jack's cuſtom, he went around the town, visited his mother, which wasn't often, because she was so often in the fields. She was so particular about the cleanliness of the farmland; no dirt on her hands, not even a speck of mud, never a drop of cooking oil on her feet, never a raindrop.

She used pails to collect rainwater and washed her hands several times a day, always after she ate. She was the beſt cook in the world, no doubt, and Jack always went home feeling hungry, no matter how much he ate. His mother's food was of the richeſt quality, of course, made with love for a man who couldn't talk, and who could only throw asparagus spears at you with his tongs, and drink beer from his red-and-white-banded mug, which looked exactly like the old red-and-white-banded mug that Jack had given to his parents.

Jack's mother had been dead for years.

"In here, Jack."

Jack went over and was greeted by a blinding light.

"Charlie! It's you! What are you doing up so late?"

"Oh, I always look forward to your visits, Jack. I must admit, it does make my nights a bit brighter."

Charlie put the sun down and pressed on a lever. The two of them stepped back as the walls began to rise, stretching above them, rising all the way to the sky. Charlie looked at Jack.

"I've never been very good with heights, so I guess I can't afford to get hurt."

"Why don't we talk about something more comfortable?" Asked Jack, "like how much you miss your father."

Charlie sat down on the sofa and pushed his wet clothes away from his feet. His father had hated his son's hobby, the two of them had spent hours every week staking out mum's wheat fields. Only this time Charlie had been unlucky.

"I do miss my father, Jack, to be honest. I do miss him very much, but what is there to miss?"

"You don't really miss him, do you? It's not just the staking out that you miss, it's what your father taught you, his patience and his discipline."

"Jack, you always make me feel guilty. That's not true at all."

Jack leaned against the wall and looked up at Charlie:

"Charlie, you've just said that you don't miss your father, which is true, but you said that you miss what your father taught you."

"Yeah, I miss the most the way he would always shake my hand and say: 'Gentlemen, you can't kill this wheat,' and he would always want to teach me to use my spear and to be careful in how I went."

Jack raised his embalmed hand, gripping the sun.

"Is that really true? Because I could've killed you, easily."

Charlie stared at the beam of sun, and then shrugged:

"I suppose. What would you have done if you were me?"

"That's what you were taught, and you're right, I shouldn't have tried to kill you. But I always wanted to make sure I was always thinking about you."

"You are always thinking about me, you know."

Jack thought about it, and then said:

"No. I've never thought about it. I've always been thinking about the blue sky, about how our voices sounded together, and the way my face would smile when we were happy together." He sighed, "I do miss him."

Charlie took a long smoke from his pipe, but didn't offer it to Jack. A puff shaped like a teardrop fell from the pipe, and disappeared into the pocket of Jack's coat.

"Do you miss your mother, Jack?"

"Well, I do, but she was... incapable of getting herself together enough to pay me any attention. You know that my mother didn't want to have anything to do with me, but you know that it still hurts when she calls me and says: 'Billy, could you come over and water the plants for me again?' She doesn't even care if it's my birthday. But don't worry, I always make sure I go over and give her a few pins, so she won't think I forgot."

"She doesn't want you, Jack, why should she?"

"Why not?"

"No-one has any right to have a child. You know that."

Jack smiled, showing the world his white teeth.

"Yes, that's true, but what's the problem, if I have one?"

"You'd have to make a show of it, wouldn't you?"

"I'm not sure that I'd have a choice."

Charlie continued with his pipe, and took another puff.

"And would you raise your child alone, or would you ever consider marrying again?"

"I don't really see the point in getting married, to be honest. Why would I? I mean, people get divorced all the time."

"Even now?"

"That's true, but you know what they say: 'Don't meet the same person twice, and if you do, divorce is the only option.' "

"And if you'd have children, and they were cut down in their youth by a wandering hoodlums, would you go down and pull out their hearts, just like you did with my father?"

"Yes, I'd do it again, Charlie; you did it to mine." "Me too, I should've killed you when I had the chance, so that you

wouldn't bother me with your dead kid, and so that I could have a clean slate, and a nice eternity."

Jack said nothing. He eyed a tomb emerging from the river.

"Just don't make me go in there," Charlie said, "it's as bad as you think it is."

The door opened, and Alice stepped into the room.

Jack and Charlie turned to look.

Alice stared at the pair of them, her eyebrows raised. She turned and looked at the two coffins.

"It is the coffins?" She said, frowning, "but there's something wrong with them."

"What?" Said Jack, startled.

"I can't believe this they're too big, too heavy, too stinky."

Alice was with them, she was just quiet. Who was she? She looked at them, and at the coffin.

"Don't," Jack said, "I know what I saw. Let's get out of here.

"If you say so." Alice walked away.

"Don't take this the wrong way, but what the hell are you doing?" Said Jack to Alice, "I told you I'd give you the right sales pitch, but you do this all the time... What is it with you?"

"I... I can't talk about it," said Alice.

"Talk about what?"

"Jack, I'm going to die."

"What? No, you're not, please tell me you're not."

"You're not listening to me," said Alice, "I'm not dead yet. I'm just... I'm just... dead."

"Then what is it?"

"I'm a ghost."

Jack stared at the scene before him: "Oh, cool."

"Yeah, I think the only ghost that comes to all three stores is... the six-year-old kid, yeah? The little boy from Minnesota, they call him. I'm his ghost, and I'm here to buy an outfit."

Jack laughed:

"That's... that's the coolest thing I've ever heard. No wonder you're going to die soon."

Alice turned and looked at him.

"I'm sorry. You're just going to have to deal with this. There are a lot of things you don't understand about me."

"I already know about the cosmic connection, and time travel and... and reincarnation, and God knows what else..."

Charlie grabbed her ass.

"I am telling you, there is no cosmic connection, and I am telling you there is no time travel. These are just stories, and I do not believe in God."

"But you're going to die! Charlie said.

"I am not going to die. I'm not dead yet. I'm just... I'm just dead. I'm here to sell a bunch of shit I don't want."

"Jack, she's lying."

"I don't think you're lying," said Jack, "but I don't think she is either. There is something wrong with those coffins, Charlie."

"I know that, Jack, but she just met me, and we have a connection. You're here, I can see you. Don't take her word for it. I'm not dead yet, Alice."

"But I am."

"Don't say that," said Jack, grabbing her ass as well.

She grinned at the two of them lustily.

"Fuck me," she said to Charlie and Jack, "just fuck me."

They stared at her, and turned around.

"Come on," Charlie said, "the others are waiting."

"I am only your friend," said Alice.

"So, what do you want?"

"I think you're tired of all the perky clothing," said Jack, "and tired of the people who tell you what you want. So, I am going to get you an outfit that says: 'Time is a Concept.' "

"What?" Said Alice.

"Do you know what time is?"

"A concept," she replied.

"Well, right now, for you, it's the concept that you're going to die in a few hours. You're going to have to sit around waiting for hours. You're going to have to wear that outfit and you're going to fuck us both because we're going to show up to your funeral. See how the concept works?"

"Yes. Fuck me, Charlie and Jack. Make me yours."

Jack and Charlie grinned at each other.

"Can't go wrong with hot hotties. Alice was looking for hot, hotties, and I, well... you see me."

They turned to see a fat, balding, ugly man standing behind them.

"Who the fuck is this?" He said.

"Wow," said Alice, "wow, wow..."

"No, seriously," said Jack, looking from her to the man, "this is one of those strange omens I told you about."

He said nothing.

He just watched as they fucked Alice together.

"This is it, isn't it?" She said.

Charlie was smacking her pussy with his black leather glove.

"I don't know," he said "I just don't know."

"It's pretty fucking weird," she said.

"I know, I'm not even going to bother telling you not to die yet, Alice. But, if you could just stay alive for a few more hours, I'll tell you everything."

"I have to fucking die?" She said.

"Yes," said Jack "but you will live to see another day, I swear this to you."

She screamed and grabbed his hair, kissing him and jumping around, and they laughed as she fucked them both,—her asshole fucking their cocks and their faces fucking her ass, and it was a lot of weird shit and they were all very happy.

Jack & Charlie Examine the Phenomenon of Suicide at a Riverbank in China. Cap. II.

ON a cool summer night in Zhuairentang, China, farmer Lu Junyuan rowed his wooden boat out onto the river, said a prayer and threw himself to his death in the river. Observing this whole sordid happenstance were two Englishmen, Jack and Charlie.

Jack looked at Charlie and said:

"Charlie, in England, this would be called suicide."

"Jack, what are you talking about, you aren't in England."

"Well, it seems that for the past several years, Londoners have been taking their own lives in similar ways. There were even some who bought rafts. They'd go down to the Thames, strap a bottle to their body, get into the water and wait for a wave. It seems that some think the practice is therapeutic. If you're wondering, the water's remarkably warm."

"This poor sod must be going down there to end his life." He pointed to a particularly despondent looking Chinaman who was shuffling his way into a forest, "in any case, he's going down there for our entertainment, to make our weekend one of riotous merriment." He shrugged, "why do the local folk here seem to find this place so suitable for offing themselves?"

"I don't know, Charlie, but I'd bet offing yourself in a Chinese river feels quite different from offing yourself in the Thames, no matter what people say. Why, when I was back in England last year, I saw one young lass climb up onto a ledge to have a look at the London lights. She must have gotten so drunk that she fell and died."

"Well, Jack, I'm sorry that you missed your opportunity to fulfill your lust." Charlie shook his head.

Suddenly, a man approached them. It was the philosopher named *Fung Be,* an opium addict and wild man who liked to get drunk on vodka and opium and walk up to strangers, and ask them if they wanted to have a chat.

"You English folk are very strange, you know. The way you understand death is so different from the way we understand it, here in China. We believe that you are in a state of absolute spiritual awareness from birth to death. You know, we believe you are a spiritual being, in a state of pure awareness. We call this pure awareness our *Tao*."

"Oh yeah, so then why are we hanging out on this river bank drinking beer?" Charlie snorted.

Fung Be was taken aback by this retort.

Jack piped up: "Charlie, you drink beer and talk about how cool the river is, not caring about a damn thing, but that doesn't make you spiritual?"

Fung Be glared at Charlie: "You English people are so arrogant. You talk about all the adventures you've had in your lives, but yet, you think nothing of dying. You're the most powerful people on Earth, yet you're the least spiritual. You think because you're so far away from nature, and you are so far from each other, that you're somehow superior."

"Hey, it's not about superiority," Jack objected.

"What are you talking about?" Charlie said.

Fung Be ignored him. Gesturing wildly, he said:

"You foolish Englishmen! You know the sensation of being drunk. So the beer, or vodka, is an extension of that. The beer is the spiritual state of being, so when we drink it, we're truly in a state of spiritual awareness. When we drink alcohol we're conscious of our existence on Earth, we can talk to each other, we can talk to the spirits. Even you. Perhaps you're so far from nature that you're in a spiritual state."

Fung Be stormed off and disappeared into the trees, headed to another person, to ask if they'd like to have a chat.

"Hey Charlie," Jack said, "what do you know about Chinese philosophy?"

Charlie shrugged:

"Some, what do you know about drinking beer and smoking opium?"

Jack laughed: "Not as much as that angry Chinese chap we just encountered. But really, have you ever studied Chinese philosophy? I've got this book that dates back to the first century, and it has some very interesting things in it. Oh, I just read a line about how it's important to have a spiritual awareness no matter where you are in the world. In fact, the earliest Chinese philosophers believed that the most important thing in life was your spiritual awareness. But then they realized that if they knew more about the spiritual realm, they would also know more about the realm of nature. And if they knew more about

nature, they would know more about human nature, and so it went. So when a man casts himself into a river, he's really casting himself into a state of absolute nature, that is, into a state of pure spiritual awareness. And when he's in that state, the pleasures of living, all the sensations of life appear in this pure state of awareness, not in any other form. And if he drinks beer he can drink it as though it's water, and then he can experience the pleasures of drinking water."

Charlie looked at Jack, wanting to know if Jack really thought all of that nonsense.

He smiled: "Jack, we were just standing here talking about how we're all spirits, but we're not. We're people and people are people, only an arrogant man thinks that he's in a state of pure awareness, when he's just drunk his bum off. Then, suddenly, a philosopher came along and taught us something different. How do you think we ended up standing on this river bank drinking beer?"

Jack chuckled: "Okay, this whole philosophy of being a spiritual being living in the realm of nature, well, that means that you should think about how you're making your life here on this Earth, and not about making it to the highest mountain peak, or getting revenge on the old man that didn't let you buy the boat. Think about what the river says about your life, here on Earth. Think about what the wind is saying about you. And then think about what the trees and the grass and the rocks and the rivers are saying about you. And that's how you know what you're doing in life is right."

Charlie shrugged: "None of this answers the burning question: Why do so many folks around these parts kill themselves in this valley?"

"Well, Charlie, that's a question that requires an answer of its own. I don't know why so many people around this valley kill themselves."

Fung Be appeared again. Clearly, no one else wanted to talk to him at that time of day.

"The answer to that question is simple," Fung Be said, "the people here are far from nature. That's the reason why they kill themselves. They're far away from the beauty and the wonders of nature. When you're in the forest, it's almost as though you're in the clouds, and the wind is singing and the sun is shining, and the rocks are sparkling, and the trees are waving, and it's just incredible. You feel like you're walking into heaven. But these people,—they do not have those feelings, and so, they kill themselves."

Jack and Charlie regarded Fung Be, their faces serious:

"Oh, that makes sense," Jack said.

Charlie nodded. Then, Jack asked:

"Say, have you ever killed anyone?"

"I have."

"Like, someone that you knew was evil, or maybe one of your friends that was dying of some kind of disease?"

"One of my friends."

Jack sighed: "No wonder you like to drink beer."

Charlie squinted: "Why did you kill them?"

Fung Be frowned: "I did it because they asked me to."

Charlie began laughing: "You know, Jack, everyone here thinks that being a spirit living in nature is the way to be happy. No wonder people are so crazy here, no wonder they all want to jump off the bridge."

Charlie laughed and drank some beer. He looked at Jack:

"Jack, you want another beer?"

Jack shrugged: "I suppose I do."

Jack grabbed his beer and laughed:

"Okay, Charlie, I'll keep drinking beer. I don't think I'll die from it, and I might live to enjoy it."

"You want to live to enjoy beer, Jack?"

Jack laughed: "Yes, I want to live to enjoy beer."

Jack & Charlie Deliver Some Perfume. Cap. III.

During the winter, Jack and Charlie came by one evening, and found the place almost deserted. A summer breeze swirled through the boulevard, which was fragrant with the strange perfumes of the trees. The garden teemed with the reds, purples, yellows, and oranges of summer in every shade of ripening and fading, the flags and torches of the festival; a lone horseman was approaching, and stared at them with curious eyes, as they sat by the marble fountain, smoking pipes and reading the signs.

The horseman dismounted, and walked toward them, a pale, yellow-haired fellow with a pleasant face and pale green eyes. He introduced himself as Nourain, and related that the perfume-garden was his mother's. He was twenty-three years old, and he owned a hundred-acre estate just outside of Aleppo.

"I had it painted," he said, "to match the perfume-garden."

"In the wintertime?" Jack said.

"A pretty time for the spectacle of flowers."

Charlie coughed:

"I've never been in the garden," he said.

"When the weather's cold," said Jack, "but if you don't mind the cold, it's delightful to be at the perfume-garden."

Nourain nodded his head:

"All these years I've hardly seen the wind which blows here in silence. This might be the best of all flowers."

He looked at the green leaves trembling in the night breeze.

"I see what you mean," Jack said, "I like a snug patch with branches in the shade."

Charlie liked the form of the place, and the transept, with its illumination from the windows.

"What a lovely perfumer!" Said Nourain, looking at the bottles of oil on a wooden shelf, "this is not in the description of the garden, but of my mother's Mayanus Augustinus! Let me see! This is the perfume that she wears; it grows in the crypts of

Palmyra, where the skull of Osiris lies. One drop from this makes women forget their husbands."

Jack took a cup from his pocket and filled it with the oil. He gave it to Nourain, who smelled it with intense delight.

"This is the perfume," he said, "of Heron of Alexandria, and Hebe of Cyrene, and Columba of Cyrene, and Solon; it had the inscription: 'Carmel l'oeil fruit repentée firma royalis,' found on it by a hunter, and it's become famous all over the world, since it's used to put out small fires, or even for bringing animals to death."

"Good to know," said Jack, "don't let any silly young man send you into the darkness by the scent of the garlic."

Charlie laughed, but he himself was wondering, for the first time in his life, if there might not be something of the darkness in all the perfumes of the world. He noticed Jack giving the cup back to Nourain.

"I think that's the last of them," Jack said.

Nourain nodded: "But I want you to have another one, a special gift from me. It's not often I give a favor to one so young, but I wish you good luck.

"Are you sure?" Asked Jack, "a rose for a man of fifty?"

Nourain laughed:

"My father died in the third year of his reign."

Jack said nothing.

"And my mother died in the fifth, with the same illness."

"So you're an orphan?" Asked Jack.

"A man of the best age," said Nourain, "if I'm lucky I shall die in the twelfth year."

He left.

Jack looked at the bottle of the perfume, which was small:

"I think it's nice, but don't I have to wear it myself?"

"No, if I were you," said Charlie, "I'd hold out for something a little more respectable, like Petit Broussard."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"That can't be," Charlie said, "he's written 'Anne Rive.' "

"Oh, what a beauty! I wish you could see it; it's the best book in the world... but it's not for me."

Charlie sniggered.

The two Englishmen went in search of the famous author, and saw that Petit Broussard was at the back of the room, sipping a drink from a glass of clear, colored, liquid. He was tall and thin, and his beard was of a dark color, as if he had recently shaved. His hair was straggly and golden, but his eyes were gray. His whole appearance was that of a strange leper.

Charlie glared at him, disgusted, but Jack smiled at him, in an amiable way, and then he shook his hand and tried to talk to him, but he kept saying in a low voice:

"My name is Bo Gu, and you're not very bright."

Finally, Jack moved away, turning to Charlie and saying:

"It's all nonsense, this whole ritual, I don't understand a word of it."

"Be careful, Jack," Charlie said, "you've got to watch out for this one. You might be dealing with some kind of voodoo, if you're not careful."

"It isn't voodoo," Jack said, "it's nonsense. But I suppose I'll have to keep an eye on him."

"You see, Jack, this man is a very unusual man. He was a very famous poet, a rather distinguished figure in his day, but he has become utterly obscure. He has disappeared into the end of the earth. He is the author of an enormous volume of verse: 'Anne Rive,' and he is notorious for having stolen the head of one of the most celebrated women of the last century."

"What a strange thing to say! But I guess you're right, Charlie. So he's a thief and a liar... he's not your usual type of person."

"If he's your type of person," Charlie said, "it's a good thing he's a poet. I think he's probably as literate as a cat."

"Or perhaps a dog," Jack added.

"It is peculiar, but it is the fact, he has lived in this town for fifteen years, and during that time, the wife and the child he had with another woman have died. He lives alone, with his books and his cheap toys. The woman was an actress."

"And you believe all that?" Jack said.

"Yes, I believe that he wrote that wonderful, beautiful verse, which was the cause of his fame and his fortune. And he must have written it just in the nick of time, because it was the only thing he could write. I mean, there's not much about him in the papers, except that he's very reclusive. He is an enigma, and he was considered very important, at one time, among his own people."

"What people?"

"The French."

Jack shook his head:

"Ah," he said, "the French! Can't you see how they exaggerate everything?"

"It's not exaggerating," said Charlie, "it's seeing things: 'It is said that he was a great man among his own people.' They are very grand-sounding words, but, you know, there is one man who can make or break a poet,—that is, a literary man, and the poet is a man, he has a soul."

"Does he? It seems to me every poet worth his salt has long sold his soul in some Faustian deal."

"Oh Jack, it's true that a poet might sell his soul in a number of ways. Some of the greatest poets have done that, but a poet's soul is like a soul of a fish,—it can't be bought, and a poet's soul is his life. His blood is his blood, and no poet's soul can ever be bought."

"Then we must assume that he doesn't have one, you said that he is an enigma, but his friend George-"

"George is a mediocrity!" Charlie cut in, "he is a man of no mind. He's a little squeaker, and a very ignorant man. He's good for one thing,—having a good time and eating and drinking and dancing and singing... that's his 'interest in life.' "

"What about his poems?"

"He wrote a poem once, a long time ago, about a man named Ferd. Ferd the tailor was a clerk in his tailor shop, but he was a very worthless clerk. He never told his boss the truth, he didn't want to be blamed, because if he was blamed for some-

thing, his boss would beat him. So Ferd always lied, he lied when he said that he had an appointment with the rich lady in the hat. He lied when he said that he went on an errand to the fish merchant, and he lied when he said that he was out shopping for hosiery. He never went on errands, he never went on *any* errands... he was lazy."

Petit turned around: "You slander my friend George, but you know the contents of his poem so well... why is that?"

Charlie smiled:

"There's an expression, Monseigneur Broussard, we call it a 'philosopher's smile.' You understand what I mean? When a philosopher smiles, it's not like a joke, it's more like a kind of self-advertisement,—which doesn't make it any better. You know, *a philosopher's smile,* a man who is so proud of his own principles, so conceited, so self-satisfied, that he can't bear to hear of anyone else's suffering. A man who thinks that he has everything figured out. That's what he means when he says: 'I have a philosopher's smile.' "

Petit thought for a moment:

"You must understand, I don't have a 'philosopher's smile,' I'm too old for that... I remember... I *remember*..."

Charlie thought for a moment:

"The poor things have a hard life. They must lie, cheat, steal. They must live a lie. Why? I don't know, but it seems to me that it is because they have little souls. Poor little souls! I pity them."

Jack smiled.

"What's the matter, Monseigneur Broussard? Don't you like the idea of men of little souls?"

Petit snorted and shook his head.

"What I'm asking is," said Charlie, "what we are going to do about a man who has a soul."

Petit frowned. He thought for a moment:

"I'm not sure. I really don't know," he said, "when I was a boy, I wanted a soul. I wanted to feel the same things that a man should feel. I wanted to feel the wind on my face, I wanted to feel love, I wanted to feel despair. I wanted to feel all the feel-

ings, I wanted to be myself, but when I was a man, I had a small part of me, the one that was outside the skin. I've had a lot of feelings and I've had my own narrow little part of the world. I've never forgotten it, but I never had a soul like I wanted to."

Charlie stood up and pointed his finger at Petit:

"But, Monsieur Broussard, you can still feel, you're still alive, you're still able to look at the sky and the earth, and they are still new and magical to you, and they have everything that a man ought to have. But there are millions, millions of people in the world who are not like that. Who are not looking at the sky and the earth, who are not feeling. That's why we are doing this, because the eyes of the world are upon us, they are looking at us, they are watching us, they are judging us... they are awaiting their judgment."

"What judgment are you talking about?" Petit asked.

"The judgment of souls, because, you know, I've been telling people for a long time, you see, that a philosopher is something other than a man. He is something *other* than a man, and not only that, he is someone who knows that he knows nothing, and the more he knows, the less he knows. And that's what a philosopher is. A philosopher is someone who knows that he knows nothing."

"You're saying that people don't have souls," Said Petit.

"Yes, that's what I'm saying. That's what all my books are saying. That's what my poems are saying. I'm saying that a soul has to have a little room, because if it has too much room,—it's too full. And if it has too much room, it grows and it becomes self-centered. If you are a philosopher, you have a tiny little room in the universe, and I'm saying that it is a sacred room, and it is there to be used wisely.

Jack frowned:

"What is the wisdom of that?" He asked.

"When we are still in the shape of our natural selves, when we are still six feet tall and big and fat, when our stomachs still growl and our bellies have not begun to fill out. When we are small and tired and weak, when we are still that little, weak, vul-

nerable creature in the belly of our mother's womb..." Charlie said, staring straight at Jack, "that is when the world is as it ought to be. That is when it is natural. But that is not when it is great. That is not when it is beautiful. That is not when it is wise."

Petit laughed:

"You don't really believe all that."

"It is beautiful," Charlie said, "it is true."

Jack just shook his head. He'd never really been able to grasp Charlie's philosophy. It made sense alright, but it made no sense, not in any practical sense at all. In practical terms, Charlie's premise didn't hold water at all. The first thing Charlie had done was to go out into the world and start killing people. He'd killed a bunch of people who weren't even people, so as to show that he was a philosopher. Then, when he'd accomplished that, he had said that it had been the first step in building the philosophy of philosophy, and then, when he'd accomplished that,—he had gone out and started killing other people, the people who weren't thinkers, the people who were not his audience.

Jack turned to Petit:

"Have you any plans to write another book?"

"Yes, I do," Petit said.

"Tell us about it."

"It is to be about the origins of the universe."

"You mean it's about God?"

"Exactly."

"Are you going to make God human?"

"Yes," said Petit, "I'm going to make God human."

"That is really wonderful," said Jack, "that's fine."

"There's just one problem," said Petit.

"What's that?" Jack said.

"I'd have to think about it... I haven't got a clue how I'm going to do it."

"Oh," Jack said. He turned back to Charlie,"What's your philosophy of life, Charlie?"

Charlie rubbed his hands together and licked his lips:

"That's easy, Jack, it's all about efficiency."

Jack looked at him in amazement:

"Is that it?"

Charlie shrugged:

"It is what it is, Jack."

The two of them considered Petit Broussard, in his apartment, in his pajamas, in his kitchen. Jack started to say something, but decided not to, not now. Instead he said: "What happened to you?"

"Not much," Petit said, "Not much at all."

To that, Jack and Charlie could only agree.

Jack & Charlie Track Down Their Lost Prostitutes. Cap. IV.

QUite suddenly, Charlie burst into Jack's quarters.

"The girls! The girls are gone, Jack! Our whores are gone!"

"Our whores?" Queried Jack, looking bewildered.

"Licked out of existence, Jack!" Cried Charlie, "we're stark fucked, Jack. How are we to run a brothel without our strumpets? We're finished!"

"How could they disappear, Charlie?"

"I don't know, Jack. I don't know how they could vanish. I know that it's some sort of magic, but I don't know how it could work."

"What magic?"

"I don't know, some sort of magic. But why? Why would magic do this to us? We're poor whore-farmers, Jack, why would magic want to take away the only livelihood of the poor? Why?"

"Perhaps they ran away?"

"No, they wanted for nothing, Jack. You know that, they must have been stolen from us by magic."

"Is there any chance of getting them back?"

Charlie smiled:

"Can you hear the girls crying?"

"I don't hear them, let's go out and look."

"The girls are crying," Charlie repeated, "or crying out to be punished. But they are not crying in their natural voices. I can see that they have learnt to meekly submit to their fate. They are quivering, like the old women that you used to beat when you was little. I can hear the mutterings of the girls in the garret. I can hear the girls down on the beach."

"Can we find them?"

"Let's go out and look, Jack!"

Jack did not question Charlie any more that day, he followed the man's example, and he looked with steady eyes at the proceedings of the ordinary men and women around him. For the time being he seemed to have forgotten the unhappy story which was his own. The sun shone upon his features and the crisp morning air filled his nostrils with the sweetness of the sea.

He asked himself:

"How can a man who has been in this place for such a short time bear to hear so much about it? How can the people who have lived here for years bear to see so much of it?"

When Jack and Charlie returned to the Market Street of the town, they were greeted with cheers of welcome. The men and women, who usually strolled around the market-place in search of amusement, had their two heroes—the pimp-heroes—before them. But Jack and Charlie couldn't pay them any attention, they were on the hunt, they needed to find their girls, and without letting the whole town know the whores were gone. And in this they were successful.

They kept moving around the town, and they turned up one or two whores that they had missed before. They couldn't talk, —but suddenly, they noticed a large, previously concealed heap of rubbish near a stone's throw from the wharf.

"They've left it there," said Jack, looking at Charlie with some sort of pride.

"And that's where they'll be," replied Charlie.

"We've got them!" Cried Jack.

He took the lamp from Charlie and they ran back along the bank of the river, and they saw the girls making their way down to the river.

"What are they doing?" Asked Charlie.

"They're swimming," said Jack, jumping into the water.

"Pardon me, but I think you're in the water a bit too deep."

"It's alright. Maybe you'd better come in with me."

The girls moved nearer.

"Aren't you the funny boy from the wharf?" Asked the smallest one.

"Yes, I am, what's your name?"

"Well, my name is Alice," she said, laughing nervously, "I suppose you're called Charlie by now?"

"I am. You know me. I'm your employer. I'm Jack."

"Jack! Jack! Jack, me Jack!" She yelled.

"Oh, it's alright, Alice, it's all-right. Don't be frightened, I'll do anything you want."

"I'd like to have my tights off, what about it, Jack?"

"Sure."

"I'd like them off. How about it, Jack?"

Jack smiled:

"There you are, Alice," he said "are you ready?"

"Yeah, I'm ready."

Jack got a hold of the tights and he pulled them off her. He pulled them down to her knees. He pushed them down further and she said "Ouch!"

"Don't worry about it. I want you to take them all the way off. Is that alright, Alice?"

"Yes, I don't mind."

"Right, that's good enough for me. Now, put your hands down by your side."

She did so, and Jack pulled the tights right off her.

"Right, now stand up and turn around."

She obeyed, and Jack stood.

"Alright. I'd love to fiddle about with you more, darling, but we need to know where the rest of the girls are."

They started off walking, and it soon became apparent that the others were not far away. They reached the wharf, and Jack and Charlie breathed a sigh of relief.

"Good girls," said Charlie, "come on out."

"You're the Boss!" Cried the youngest one.

"Yes, and so are you, come on out and say hello."

They did as they were told. They turned out to be only about five feet six in height. The girls all had red hair, and when they stretched out their hands, and shook Jack's, their bodies seemed to twist into a different shape.

"Let's call her Penny," said Jack.

"You can call me: What-do-I-do-with-you. I'm called Dee, by the way. We could play, Jack. Wherever you want. We could-"

"No, we can't, Dee, not until I say so. Now, where's the fourth one?"

"At the bottom of the river."

"Right, *right,* and you're the other one, right? Perfect!"

"What are you getting at, Charlie? He's our employer."

"Listen, Charlie, we're going to be blackmailed, you and I. *He's* going to blackmail us. He's going to threaten us with causing a lot of trouble if we don't do what he tells us."

"Don't be daft, He's nothing, we'll kill that captor. Let's go, Jack, this is a one-man job."

"Alright, Charlie."

With that, they headed into the compound. The girls were busy unpacking boxes. Jack and Charlie walked into the warehouse. Jack headed for the office. Behind the desk sat a man, but there was something very off-putting about him. There was a seething energy about him, and it made Jack feel uncomfortable. There were splashes of different colors all over his face. His hair was purple and he had eyes like worms.

The man raised himself from his chair:

"Yes?"

"I'm going to kill you," said Charlie, "but first, you're going to tell us why you stole our women."

He trained his gun at the man.

"This is all very interesting," the man said, "what you just said makes sense, I must admit."

"Please," Charlie gestured towards the office, "it might be easier to talk inside."

The man lowered himself into the chair behind the desk:

"What do you want to know?"

"Everything. But first, why did you do it? There's something wrong with you. We know that. Please."

"You'd be surprised at how many things are wrong with me. I stole them because I am better at this business than you two are."

Jack slammed the table: "Who are you?"

The man continued, in a detached, almost dull tone:

"I am the spirit of delirium, I am the one who gathers the missing pieces from the minds of the missing girls. You two," he nodded towards Jack and Charlie, "you are only mediums, I am the one who interacts with them."

"And why does it matter so much that they are missing parts of their minds?"

"They will be available to me when they are."

Charlie drop-kicked the desk, and the man rose with a gasp. Charlie brought the gun up and fired twice. The first bullet hit him in the chest, while the second took him in the head. The man dropped dead.

Jack stood by his gun:

"Are you alright, Charlie?"

"No, Jack, I think there was another man in the office."

They both rushed in to investigate. The man was already dead. Charlie searched his body.

"Looks like I found something of interest." He pulled out a key-chain that contained a large amount of keys, "I need to find out how they work."

"Good idea. What are you going to do, Charlie?"

Charlie frowned: "I want to go back in there and look for more of this strange stuff."

"Good idea."

They entered the hangar, a plethora of girls were tied to

posts inside. All of them were unconscious. There was an old man dressed in faded robes on a chair in the center of the room.

He turned around:

"Hello-"

Jack fired three rounds, and the man dropped dead. Charlie made his way inside and walked to the girls:

"Are you alright? Did any of you get hurt?"

The girl with blue eyes, who wore a shabby dress and had brown hair tied into a ponytail,—answered:

"My name is Susan."

Charlie sighed:

"I'm really sorry about this, Susan. We shouldn't have tried to come out here. I need to find out who they are."

"A-Ashley?"

"Yeah, that's her, she was walking home."

"Susan is my sister. You killed my father, by the way."

"Your father tied you up here?"

The girl nodded.

"They must have used mind control on you. We were there for a night. They said they were doing research for the government."

Charlie turned to the girl with pink hair:

"You're Evelyn."

"Um, hi, I don't know if you can understand me or not, but I know you're not really here."

Charlie gasped: "My name is Charlie. I'm here to save you. It's important that you come with me."

The girls all nodded. They followed Jack and Charlie and found that working for them was almost as good as going to the center of the Earth.

Jack & Charlie Visit Aleppo. Cap. V.

DUring the night, Jack and Charlie were fishing for eels in the North Sea, braving that most disturbed chasm between the Scandinavia and their native land of the British Isles. The weather was beginning to worsen, and a light

rain ſtarted to usher in a potential ſtorm. Nonetheless, the two remained in their boat, determined to not be deterred by the spasms of atmospheric turmoil.

"Let's go to Aleppo, Charlie," Jack said.

"What is Aleppo, Jack?" Charlie asked.

"The place where the great sea god Neptune wants to be baptized with water from the pure fresh spring." Replied Jack.

"Remember Nourain, that 23 year old Prince or King who gave me perfume back in the day? Well, he's been caught up in a war, and I figure we should take a look at what all the fuss has been about."

As they spoke, they were submerged in water up to their necks. Although the waves were moderate in size, ſtill they tossed the raft to and fro in a violent manner, with such force as a mighty sea-serpent. They swam their way from the North Sea to the continent of Europe. The numerous tides, and the imperceptible depth of the water, impaired their navigation,—and they often separated from each other as they ſtruggled forward in their wretched craft, while the water closed over their heads, as though a gigantic whale had breached the surface. At length, however, they came to a rocky beach, and reached a thick mass of vegetation. In order to get above it they had to climb with their hands and feet.

With that, they made their way to Aleppo, with its multitudes of thieves, scavengers, swindlers, shewers, muggers, and gangbangers, for Aleppo was now full of them.

They descended to the Hell of Avariſtan, the Land of the Conqueror, and the land of the Fellai who dwelt in the ruins of ruins. They passed Babylon, and passed over the great and horrible ſtream of Karatau, that was blocked by a cairn of ſtones at its source, then they ascended the great Mountain of the Seven Fathers, the Bitter Peace. Here they did indeed encounter the Chaldeans, who had already sacked Babylon and came down to Aleppo with an army, and they had been armed by the Britons in the Time of the Copper Hand.

They proceeded to Nineveh, where the great horses of the

Assyrian invaders of Persia were being drenched in holy water by the last survivors of the Babylonian army, who were retreating by sea from Persia. They then passed through the lands of the Massagetae, and the nomad Fergana, whose soldiers did not assail them, for the old conquerors were dead, and the Fergana were now ruled by a disinherited prince of the Muscovite dynasty of Caliphs, who had united the three great powers of Persia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia.

They wandered, and wandered, and passed the city of Uruk, whose ranks did battle with the Sassanid Persians and the Iranian Tartars, and been crushed by them in a single day at the Battle of Chalagan.

Finally, they reached Aleppo. The city was decimated, but still, somehow, reflected its opulence. In a suburb, they entered a church. The services were led by an old Syriac bishop named Symeon.

Jack sat down in the middle of the room and put on a huge straw hat with a leather trim. Charlie sat next to him, and was dressed like a sheikh. The churchgoers were a bit stunned, it was a strange thing to hear the low-pitched voice of a Cockney, accented with the resonant tones of an Indian, or an American negro, speaking the history of Britain from the 12th to the 16th centuries, in the slang of the people of the East End of London.

"And so the Turks come to Europe," Jack said, "dressed in their turbans and camels, with their shearing shears and their little ploughs, and all our horses and cattle fell to their feet before them, and fell, and fell..."

"It sounds like something Dickens might have imagined." said Charlie, conversationally.

"Mmm," said Jack, "I don't think so, Charlie, Dickens would have added something about Muscovite Pederasts, or Polish whores, or Turkish mercenaries."

"Well," said Charlie, "whatever else Dickens may have added to this adventure, at least he didn't start it with a murder, otherwise you'd be the King of Kings, and we'd all be very rich."

"Ha!" Said Jack, smiling, "very rich indeed. We'd all be as rich as the Ottomans, or even the Grand Vizier of Istanbul."

"What's a Grand Vizier?" Asked Charlie.

"He's the Grand Master of a Jewish Brigade," said Jack, "sometimes known as a *Jancek*, though it's not a very nice term. He's a Jew too."

"What's a Jewish Brigade?" Asked Charlie.

"A very small and devoted army," said Jack.

"Who are they fighting?"

"I dunno," said Jack, "Vlad the One-Eyed, maybe. Anyway, he's the Grand Vizier and they're fighting him, so they're fighting the people he gives them to fight. Jewish brigades are going up to the Promised Land, and they've found the Egyptian army, which is under Khorsabad, which has a corrupt Emir who's totally unreliable, so they're running away to Khorasan, which is the last part of Persia to fall to the Arabs. They're coming back to fight the Crusaders, but they're also going to fight the Muscovites, and the Afghans, and the Tartars. So far, so good."

"But isn't Persia a country?" Asked Charlie.

"It's an empire," said Jack, "not a country."

"So if the Tartars marched in and took it over, they'd still be, essentially, a republic, and their emperor would still be their king?"

"Absolutely," said Jack.

"So if the Tartars attack, wouldn't that be as good for the Jews as it is for the Muslims?"

"Yes, I suppose so... I suppose so."

"So," asked Charlie, "how did the Muslims win the sack of Baghdad?"

"Oh," said Jack, sighing, "they did that in the 16th Century, and it was their Humpty-Dumpty moment. I mean, that was the end of the invasion, the Crusaders fled and left it to the Muslims, and when the Christians took back Mosul, I dunno what happened, but anyway, that was that. My point is: The Crusades are over, and history is repeating itself, that's my point."

"But you're in history," said Charlie.

"No, I'm in *your* history, that's why I'm here. I'm the kind of guy who gets into history all the time, you can quote me on that, and for free, too."

"You mean you get into the history books?" Asked Charlie.

"No, I get into history in real life, every Tuesday night."

"Anyways, I didn't take you for a Christian, Jack, and in fact I don't think I ever spoke to you about religion, why's that?"

"When I was younger," said Jack, looking around nervously, "I used to pray to an Arabic archangel called 'Allah.' I still do, a bit, so I don't think I'm mad at all. It's just that about eighteen years ago, I got caught up in a real mess. Well, it wasn't all my fault. It was sort of his fault, and sort of mine, and sort of the world's fault, but still... This guy in London called Osama Bin Laden, he was really bent on taking over the world. He was a Palestinian man from what I heard, and he had a cousin called Mohammed, and Mohammed was really great. Mohammed was a good guy, too, sort of, and he was really clever. He had all these ideas, but they were pretty good ideas, so I really liked him, you know? I knew I was gonna miss him when he was gone, but we'd have to make it up somehow. What Mohammed said to me was pretty much, basically, this: 'You have to set a better example.' I mean, I was a stupid kid, but he was a really wise guy, so I was really impressed by him. Anyway, I did what he said, and I started living up to the example. I ended up trying to learn Arabic, and more importantly,—Arabic folklore."

"That's really interesting. Anyway, we should find Nourain."

"Yeah, Nourain, he's my favourite," said Jack.

"Yeah, Nourain," said Charlie, "I remember the story of him being swallowed by a fish."

"Yes, it was actually true, sort of... Well, the story, at least."

"You know where Nourain is?" Charlie asked.

"I do, I can see his palace just over there."

"Where is that?"

"Over there, at the end of the road, that's where he lives."

"What? he lives in a place called Jallah?"

"Yes, it's Arabic for: 'You gotta be jerking my beefaroni.' "

"Oh," said Charlie.

Jack led the way over to the end of the road, and there, indeed, was a building called Jallah. It was built with a clear Andean stylistic influence: Walls made of cobble were chiseled to resemble faces, each holding a gazing mouth and sharp piercing eyes, each of which rested upon a square noseless face. A row of curiously placed spindly columns, interspersed with numerous windows, encircled the dwelling. It had the color of a dangerous but kind and poetic exoticism. The cobblestones were sandstone, the window frames were wood, and the door itself was carved from conch shells. Jack knocked on the door with a blunt, ugly, concrete fist, a dog barked back from inside the house. Jack rang the bell with a series of tinges and otherworldly, unpredictable sounds.

Jack called out: "It's me, Jack. I need to see Nourain!"

There was no answer. Jack knocked again. He rapped the metal door with his knuckles.

"Hello?" Jack knocked.

The front door of the house burst open with a terrible, echoing clang. A young man with a mop of wild, brown hair, a wide forehead, and bulging eyes, a stoop-shouldered, gangly figure, a scraggly beard, and a rainbow-colored outfit,—baroquely draped over a huge, almost disfigured body,—opened the door:

"Lord Nourain shall see you now," he said to them.

They walked in. In contrast to the Incan-styled exterior, the interior of the house was decidedly Polynesian, everything from the white empty walls to the bulky, spiny furniture, a feathered frieze above the doorway, and a group of brown plastic birds perched on a staircase leading down to the basement. The ceilings were covered with intricately carved wood, and the floor had notches in it for the three-legged tables. It was decorated with hundreds of votive candles, all made of little colorful triangles, though none were burning.

A group of young men were seated around the table, playing a game of stone-pelting using small round stone balls. In the corner, a large bowl of fruit was fermenting in a sort of soup of

limes, oranges, pomegranates, and pears. The young men were surrounded by elderly men. Two of them seemed to be dressed as Roman legionaries, but the others wore pinstriped suits and wide-brimmed hats.

"Hello, Nourain," said Jack, looking to be a little disheveled and slightly out of breath, "what a pleasure to meet you again."

"Hello, Jack, Charlie," said Nourain.

"Hello. Hello. Hello."

"Hello. Hello," said Jack, thoughtfully.

Charlie greeted him too, though he was more interested in what the game was: "Say, Nourain, what is this game?"

"You mean this 'boll-rims?' " Asked Nourain, nodding towards the game.

"Yes, what's it all about?"

"It is a game played by the hands, Charlie," said Nourain, "it is the game of shaping and manipulation, or, in other words, just 'beating the ostrich.' "

"Um... okay," said Jack, "how do you play it?"

Nourain began explaining the game:

"One person takes one ball and 'picks up' the others, the other players all 'call,' and the pick-upee becomes 'the ostrich,' standing there to 'give in,' shaping and manipulating the five people around you. The Ball-Pickup sees his own ball gone, loses concentration, becomes the ostrich, and is obliged to 'give in' to the other players, giving them something 'good,' leaving the others with nothing. And all the while, the Ball-Pickup tries to call people in to 'take over' the ostrich. But the ostrich won't let you. He won't let you do it, Charlie... The ostrich will defend itself."

"How do you know this?" Asked Charlie.

"I learned it in school," said Nourain.

"Oh, well, it seems a bit complicated," said Charlie.

"The thing is, the ostrich is trying to escape," Nourain retorted, "the ostrich is desperately trying to call the other players away from it, and it has to keep all the balls in it, that it picks up."

"So you can't take all the balls?" Jack asked.

"Of course not," said Nourain, smiling, "I like that one, but it takes some skill to pick the balls up."

"Can you help me learn it?" Asked Charlie.

"No," said Nourain, laughing, "I'm too worried about war right now to teach you Englishmen how to play games. Have you heard the details?"

"No, what's been happening? Why the tension?"

"Listen, Charlie, I've got a problem,—I've *got a problem,* Charlie. It's not a problem at all really, I mean, apart from the fact that it needs addressing. The Aztecs have destroyed most of my people, they've blown them up, they've closed up the roads to all the towns, so nobody can get in or out. They've poisoned the wells, so there's no water, and they've locked the gates on all the other roads, so my people are trapped inside the walled city, and the Aztecs are just going to let them starve to death. And that's my problem,—*my problem.*"

Charlie listened to the tale, his own face turning white: "How long have you been here? How many of your people have you lost?"

"Oh, quite a lot," said Nourain, "it's a lot, really, and it's really the Aztecs who are to blame, they've always been like this. Now they're mad, they are... they're mad."

"If you let it go on for long, it'll be a famine, then," said Charlie.

"It won't be a famine," said Nourain, "they'll have a feast. They'll live like kings, until they've eaten up all the people. Then they'll send in the troops, and it'll be a slaughter. The walls of the city will come down, and they'll let in the dogs."

"Who's leading them?" Asked Charlie.

"The damned Chalchiuhtli! My stupid old half-brother. He always lived in his own time and space. I told him not to let it get this far, to stop the fighting, to bring the armies back, but he always thought that's what you were supposed to do, and I can't see any alternative now. He can't see a future, he can't see a future at all, that's why he and his adoptive Aztec people have been marching all around the country, destroying every village

he comes to. I've tried to stop him. I've tried to threaten him, entreat him, but he doesn't care. He's a fool. He's doomed. I shall kill him myself."

"I saw an army outside the gate, who are they?"

"That's the Chaldean Army, they're not doing us any favors. They're attacking us from the north, and they're going to take us out, tear the city open, and go through the middle. That's the way they work."

"Is there anyone helping? Any allies?"

"The Bavarians and the Zulus, but it's not enough. We are dying here, Charlie,—It's inevitable. Only a miracle could save us now. Do you believe in miracles?"

"Yes," said Charlie, "I do."

"Well, there's a miracle out there, I can feel it in my bones, and it's got to find a way in here. I've seen it, Charlie, I've seen it..."

Suddenly an explosion shook the walls. In one single, perfectly proportioned explosion, one of the towers on the western side of the palace had fallen. It was a tremendous sight, even at a distance. Half a dozen of the siege engines in the outer courtyard had been blown up. Large chunks of rock from the walls of the city had fallen in on themselves, dust plumed into the air, and there was a deep rumbling that rose up the wooden stairways and ran through the endless rooms and corridors of the city. They heard a dull, echoing boom, like a thunderclap, in the distance, and then there was an agonizing silence. It was a long while before they could hear anything else. And then the city walls collapsed, and the Chaldeans poured through the breaches and followed the river of terrified people that were pouring out of the city. There were a thousand children with them, and their terrified parents, and their fathers in their false beards, and their mothers in their shawls and their brightly patterned saris, carrying trays of fruits and figs. They were escaping in all directions, a cloud of refugees, a mad stampede.

Jack and Charlie were both quite giddy, as they had never been in a war before. Now that the city walls were breached, there was no reason why they shouldn't start firing at once.

But the cannons were outside the city, outside the city walls. Then the Aztecs appeared. They were dressed in their great feathered capes, embroidered robes, their heads crowned with feathers and inlaid with gold. They came in on tanks, and were armed with guns and spears. They were advancing through the smoking streets, beating on their shields, their spears clashing. In the middle of it all was Chalchiuhtli, a terrible figure, all gold and feathers, wearing a brilliant gold helmet that set off his yellow hair.

"Isn't it a shame?" He said, "all this splendor and wealth, and we haven't got a nickel to spare. We might as well go to the mud huts on the coast, and make bows and arrows, eh? I wonder where those dragons are? Where are our angels? Where are the gods that we pray to? Nowhere to be seen. For me, what I really want is a good steak, and a cold beer. Who wants to eat eggs for every meal?—I don't—And I'd like to play the piano. Anyways, kill every last one of these dogs. Now, who wants to do it?—Let's do it!"

The Aztecs spread out, shooting at everything that moved, they and their Chaldean allies were met with bitter resistance by the defenders of Aleppo, who fought with every ounce of strength they possessed. Both sides suffered heavy casualties, the Bavarians and the Zulu cavalry had made a stand, several riders had fallen to the Chaldeans. Jack and Charlie, who had never fought in a battle before,—were sitting out there, among the plumes of smoke and the charred rubble, watching the Aztecs fire their guns and bang their shields against their spears.

"They won't last long." Said Jack, pointing to the enemy forces, which were massing to attack the defenders of Aleppo.

"They certainly won't," said Charlie, "they're blowing up, firing all the time, breaking into sections and firing off at once. Look, they're trying to take over this market."

"That's a good idea," said Jack, pleased, "get those guys, that's the only way they're going to beat us."

"How do we get to them?" Asked Charlie.

"Don't worry about it." He turned to a Syrian soldier. "get the hussars and the knights and the dervishes, and don't let the people escape. I want every citizen I can find, from the lice-infested livers of the common people, right up to the fluted high-flying beaks of the scaly falcon. Send in the signal horns, Hold your positions, and keep those cannon balls flying."

The whole army charged, and the front wave of Aztecs were cut down by spears and lances and arrows. However, by now, half of Aleppo was ablaze and the Chaldeans had all but slaughtered the first line of defense. The Aztecs were drawn up in their great lines, ready to fight to the death, when Jack and Charlie sprang into action. They rode to the front, in the center of the enemy. The skirmishers from both sides were driven back as fast as they could move. A sudden, violent, even terrifying rain of musket balls, knives, spears and arrows whizzed around them.

"I have an idea!" Shouted Charlie, who was leaning on his saber, "we're too close to the fighting for their cavalry, so let's pull back to the other side. Remember the tactics in the North. Go to the right of the enemy, keep some distance, and strike. I don't know how much ammo there is, but we have to try to cut them off, then get back to the safe haven. Now let's go!"

Jack cut them off in the distance, where they could not be captured by the Aztecs. They loaded canisters of Zyclon-B into cannons and fired them at the enemy. The enemy turned their attention to those cannons, and the guards pushed the prisoners into the enemy, not allowing any survivors to flee. The enemy was enraged by the onslaught. The defenders pressed their advantage. Soon, the line of Aztec and Chaldean warriors broke and ran. The surviving enemy force fled, leaving a city in ruins behind them, only Chalchiuhtli remained. He stood face to face with Nourain, who was very calm, looked him in the eye, and said:

"I have destroyed your city. I have destroyed your houses, your churches, and your graveyards. I have torn down your towers and destroyed your walls. I have driven the citizens from their homes. I have slaughtered your women and your children.

I have taken your wealth and imprisoned your people in floating dungeons and underground dungeons. I have ruined your water supply and poisoned your wells. I have desecrated the images of your gods, and destroyed your temples, and turned your whole purpose of existence into one of vengeance. Even in victory, you are defeated, brother."

Nourain nodded and said: "The way to justice for the vanquished is not vengeance, but tolerance and forgiveness. In this way, we honor our Lord, Allah. The way to peace is not hate, but love, for we seek the truth and the light. Peace and justice must replace violence a d intolerance. In the name of Allah, I forgive you."

With that, he drew his stone scimitar and sliced Chalchiuhtli's head from his shoulders.

"Blimey!" Said Jack, "you killed him like Rome killed his cousin Remus!"

Nourain laughed: "Ah, but he was a monster, and you are a Christian. He had to die."

"Not to me, he didn't." Charlie said, but then he paused, thinking, before he continued: "There is a lesson in this, gentlemen. All this time, I thought we were fighting for control of Syria, I thought we were going to exterminate the Aztecs, kill their gods, and take their land. But it's all so much more simple. If you seek the truth, and the light, and love for humanity, then in the end, it will prevail, no matter how many people you kill, rape, or torture. In the end, it is you who must decide what is righteous, and good, and true. You must decide what is good, and right, and true for humanity, because that is who you are, and that is who God created you to be. But in the end, it is always you who decides."

Nourain looked up, and smiled.

"What do we do now?" Jack asked.

"Well, I'd say we're in a spot of bother, as the Aztecs leave a lot of dead warriors behind. I'm still quite rich, as I invested in Zyclon-B many years ago." Nourain answered, then he turned and left.

Jack and Charlie gave each other a high-five, and Charlie said: "It was a bloody good day."

Jack & Charlie Purchase Some Firearms. Cap. VI.

"OI Charlie," said Jack, "I think I know where Tiger the Chinese bear is. He's in *Tierra del Fuego*, the homeland of the Republic that spans from Patagonia to Antarctica."

"The Fuego Republic. They are in constant conflict with the neighboring Indonesian Empire?"

"They are on a permanent peace treaty," Jack corrected.

"You said he was in Tierra del Fuego."

"I don't know," said Jack, in a voice that indicated that Charlie ought to have known that already, "but that's where the reason we left that dead body in the freezer was. We've got to find Tiger the Chinese Bear, the arms merchant with better than eighty percent of the global arms trade."

"And the reason you'd go out to look for a Chinese bear is," Charlie agreed, "that it is currently the only confirmed Chinese bear in the world."

"No, the reason I would go out to look for a Chinese bear, is because it will likely be the source of arms for those riled-up mainlanders who are going to descend on St. Louis and drive its African-Americans into the high sea or out of the city into the swamps, and even if they don't, it is still an asshole move to add a foreign entity with a history of egregious human rights violations to our global supply chain."

"Well, let's get going, we don't know what that would entail, but it sounds really goddamn stupid if we just stick around."

Jack and Charlie began their journey, which turned out to be fairly quick. Unfortunately, they were not a hundred percent sure which way they'd come, and the GPS was—as they were now very nearly convinced—a little touchy. The precision of the connection between the satellite and the iPhone was fine, the way it was supposed to be, but in wind and light they often

had to turn around and do a little recalculating. Charlie's phone began to buzz, Jack picked it up,—It was a business associate:

"I should warn you, Jack, that arms dealers are not the type to be found if they do not wish to be. Do not presume to ask or even expect them to speak to you. I can assure you that they have as little interest in your presence as they would in a Big Mac in Hindustan, just about none, in fact. But you and your weapons are very important to them, because you have the absolute power to end their trade in illegal weapons. I expect you are aware of that, at least a little. But I also doubt you have any wish to do so. What weapons do you even want from Tiger?"

"Pistols and automatic rifles, pretty much, with enough spare magazines for every operative."

"Just about enough," Charlie agreed, "and all those things come mostly from Tiger the Chinese bear, he has a big warehouse in town, more guns than we know what to do with."

"I see," the associate hung up.

"We'll have to land here," said Charlie "I'm positive Tiger the Chinese bear is still here, he is his own 'West Coast Shipping Company,' and pretty well-established at that."

The base of a tall tree loomed out of the smoke haze.

"Well?" Asked Jack.

Charlie backed down the runway and angled the plane for the black roof.

"We're gonna have to go in the back door," he said, "Jack, what do you want me to do?"

"Go back to the edge of the tree, walk around it, and back in. Keep your eyes and ears open, just in case."

Jack nodded: "What was that about Tiger?"

"Probably the reason we're here in the first place, just stay on your own side of the tree and we'll figure it out."

He set the heli down at the tree's base and they both got out. There was no need to keep anyone from approaching from the front, it was, after all, a large bushy tree in a rural setting, one that had never been one of the main forest paths, and the steering branches were so low that no matter where you were stand-

ing, you could see and hear a lot of activity going on. It wasn't far from the county road, a great many trucks and cars and pick-ups had passed through here before they'd got here, and there were no fewer than seven guys working with pitchforks and shovels who had not heard them land. A handful of the ring in-tailed lemurs had already come out to investigate, half-deserted by their human companions, but they'd been scared away by the landing. Charlie saw that they were headed for the edge of the road, presumably in search of food and company.

"See if you can get something to eat, then," Jack said to Charlie, "I'll send for you when it's safe."

"The odds of that are low," Charlie responded.

"The odds of being shot dead are higher," said Jack, "just keep your head down and look where you're going."

"Okay," said Charlie.

About an hour later, Charlie returned with some foods. It was classic Fuegian cuisine, and he carried a basket-full.

"I took the liberty of ordering food for us," he said.

"Charlie, why didn't you just hunt? At least it's fast food, and you've got an opportunity to shoot a deer."

Charlie shrugged:

"Same reason you don't just go up to Walmart and ask what's for dinner."

Jack threw a look at Charlie:

"Your problems are less complicated than that?"

"I'm not a pizza joint, and besides, there was no deer to be found on the way here."

Jack frowned and looked at the contents of the basket.

"You don't like that, do you?"

"Not particularly," Charlie said.

Jack nodded: "That's probably why he chose this place."

"What?"

"Tiger... this place is the bane of all Englishmen, and the Polynesians, and the Minikinians."

"The Minikinians?"

"A loose translation of the 'Eel-and-Timber-Bow' culture. The Iroquois word for this is 'Kawah-nee-chee,' which comes from a root that means 'very bitter.' The Eel-and-Timber-Bow were founded on one core belief: That there was something special about how we think. It gave us the gift of language, the ability to store memories in long-term memory, and our remarkable ability to improvise. By devising all these innovations, the Eel-and-Timber-Bow were not just superior to everyone else, but their way of living gave them a near godlike position in the world."

"What happened to them?"

"They went to space, they invented the atomic bomb, the information revolution, the first computers. They left all that shit here for us and then fucked off. Their gain is our loss."

"How is any of that a loss? Don't they care about us?"

"First of all, every species, every culture, every civilization, builds on what came before it, including ours. The net effect is generally benign; the era in which we all had to die off one by one and leave everything to our children is over. Secondly, nothing is eternal. At some point, eventually, what comes before us will be history, and what comes after us will be our history. So everything you've been taught, everything you've been raised to believe, is a lie. As far as the Eel-and-Timber-Bow are concerned, we are all just a bunch of people who think we can do things better."

Charlie nodded: "So what should we do now?"

"Track down that bear. Do you remember what Antoine-Augustin Parmentier said to us about Tiger after Parmenides started to have a psychotic break and did something unthinkable?"

"I think I do," Charlie said, "that the bear represents our greed, our need to gather all things."

Jack nodded:

"Exactly. Listen to him, as you always have. He taught that one who followed the Buddha and his teachings and pursued life in the One Way,—would never suffer from hunger or thirst, he would never lie, he would not be ruled by passions, and there would never be any pain. Parmenides couldn't get rid of

this hunger for life. He was beaten into insanity, and we know what happened to him, but his search for truth taught us something very important."

Charlie frowned: "How so?"

"Truth is like Tiger the Chinese bear, not just personal truth, but true reality. Take away the obsession and the quest, and what do you have? You've got nothing but a bunch of hunter-gatherers living on their backs. Each of us needs to find something for himself, and the truth is very personal, very unique, and therefore, in my opinion,—worthless."

"Jack, I just want some guns. You love guns, it's what we do. You like everything about guns, you really, *really* like them. You like it when they're loaded, when they're in your hand, and when they're shooting. You tell me you love it all, but now you don't wanna get your hands on some of the rarest guns in the world because of your perplexingly nihilist belief system? What the hell is wrong with you?"

"You're right, Charlie, I am confused. By they way, we should probably ask a native to help us find Tiger."

So they did, a Selknam man named Arreti, who, in addition to his native tongue, spoke an ancient dialect of Quechua that was only spoken in the Amazon basin. He was happy to help the British boys track down Tiger.

They ended up at the southern tip of the island.

"He swim say over there. Far gone, gone gone long time. Buried he gone gone," Arreti said, "you find he. Good. Harder you better. Harder you better."

"You mean he's made his way to Antarctica? God almighty..." said Charlie, holding his head with his right hand.

Arreti shrugged:

"There once was bear who leave island gone gone about seven hundred years ago. He head for sun. Too big hole. He dead."

"And what about the bear we're looking for?"

Arreti shrugged:

"Yaghan man think he gone."

"You're kidding me."

"No, he dead. Harder you better. Not no problem. What you ask is: 'How you ask more of this world?' English man not know when give up."

They paid the man and headed back to the helicopter.

"Well," said Jack, "I suppose we find out for ourselves what's become of Tiger. I think I'm going to make some bullets, put one in my gun, and then I'm heading back to the boat."

"Jack, we might want to listen to this guy, he thinks we're looking for a dead bear."

"I'm not going to work this hard and then quit because the bear is dead. The bear's alive, Charlie, the bear's alive!"

"Alright, but what he said did stick with me, what are we doing? Maybe you were right, maybe we ought to look for something else, something else we can put our hands on that will make us powerful and important. This life is hard, it's not going to get easier, things will never be the same."

"I was thinking about that, too," said Jack, "maybe we're looking for something bigger, something that's not even on this earth. What I'm thinking about is the real thing, or the deeper thing. But I also want some fucking guns, and so do you. Do you remember what I told you when we first met?"

"No."

With that they made their way to Antarctica.

Antarctica was now, at least in part, a land with a high population. They landed in the city of Juaravi, which was like most cities in the area: Dilapidated and dirty, with squat huts for thousands of people.

They made their way to a hotel, where they checked in, and paid the concierge a thousand dollars to drive them to a one-day gun show.

The guns were in a warehouse in the outskirts of town. They had been transferred there by a Yaghan man named Romic and an Alacalufe named Susukri. They both spoke English. Susukri spoke better English than Romic.

"We don't talk Yaghan to Yaghan," said Romic, "this is an English speaker."

They asked them where Tiger was, the man shrugged.

"He get last walk," he said, "he down somewhere, in the jungle or something. We stay away, you can not stay here. Everybody give you something bad if they see you. You get nice man. They give you nice gift. You like nice gift."

"The local zoo?" Asked Jack.

"Yes," said Susukri, "you look like nice man. They give you zoo gift. You like nice zoo gift."

"Is he living down the street from here?" Asked Jack.

"Yes, he live by gun show."

"Okay," said Jack, "it's the least we can do."

"I happy," said Romic, "you come here this one day. I make good job. You like nice gift. They give you nice gun. Very nice gun. Gun good. You need big gun."

"How long do you have?"

"You think about nice gift. You think about gift. You not want to talk about gun."

"I'm not talkin' about the gun," said Jack, "I just want to know how long I have to stay here."

"In a few days," said Romic, "maybe next day."

"How about one week?"

"Yes. Maybe. Maybe longer."

"Why does this guy not want to talk about it?"

"Because maybe you decide it's a good gift. Maybe you want big gun. Maybe you think about big gun. Sometimes you think about nice gun. You think maybe the problem is not gun. You think maybe the problem is inside you."

"I'm scared," said Jack.

"Yeah, you still too little to come here. You should be in small place. Not big place. But you want to find big gun? You go big place. You find big gun. But you be careful, you. Big gun is not good. Big gun is bad."

"How long does that take?"

"There no time. But we do good job. You like nice gun? You like nice gift?"

Charlie nodded:

"Look, we just really want to talk to Tiger. Would you be so kind as to point us in the direction of his store?"

"Sure," said Romic.

"Where is it?"

"It's down by gun show," said Susukri.

"Which one?"

"This 'Gun Show.' "

He pointed in the direction of a giant neon sign. It spelled out, in three words: "The Gun Store."

The two men entered. Behind the counter sat a bear with a shaved head and a bulbous nose. The front of the store was covered in guns, each gun was bigger than any Jack had seen, there were so many that he could not see the display.

Romic showed him a table with a rack of guns on it, some were enormous, some were painted red or yellow. The rack of one was two feet wide and fifteen feet long, some of the guns looked like they had been built on a gigantic scale model of a city. Each gun was so big it had to be held with two hands.

"These are nice guns," said Susukri, "you like? The finest in country. Also great pistol. Great rifle. You like good rifle? You like good pistol? Good guns for people."

"That's nice," said Jack, "I like a big gun."

The two natives bade them farewell.

The Englishmen faced Tiger. Tiger, being a bear, of course, —could not speak, so Charlie and Jack both grabbed as many guns as they could, slammed them on the table, and asked:

"How much?"

Tiger grabbed a sign with the price, it said: "87,834 Feipiao."

Charlie asked Tiger how long he had been in business. Tiger took a gun off the table, it was a seven foot long rifle with a thirty round magazine. Tiger then simply yawned, it was a yawn so long, that it made his whole head cave in. It must have been twenty minutes since Tiger had stopped yawning. Jack and Charlie politely waited the entire time before paying him in Pounds.

They left and were greeted by a brilliant sun. It shone in the birdbath, it shone in the crosswalk, it shone through their mir-

rors. Jack, with his sunglasses on, looked like Bill Clinton, the Bavarian ſtatesman, who, after a bad night of drinking and a too-young night of carousing,—had a near-death experience and had a revelation that transformed him from an out-and-out philanderer into a genteel legislator, who dressed like a dandy and had a ſtudious wife who would teach him to brush his hair and never ask him to ſtop eating.

Charlie, with his sunglasses on, looked like a Somali woman who had undergone serious surgery to have an eye removed and replaced with a lemon.

The sun shone on Jack's lips, he looked at his watch, he thought about putting his head down.

The sun shone on Charlie's hands, he thought about taking off his watch.

The sun shone on Charlie's pockets, he thought about the way the natives had smiled at him with such intereſt when they pointed him to a gun ſtore. He wondered what it would be like to own that many guns. He wondered why they had ſtopped smiling. He wondered why he was so nervous. He wondered why he was so pale. He wondered why he did not live at the end of a canal that ran through a canyon. He wondered what time it was.

Jack & Charlie Experiment in Rocketry. Cap. VII.

A Rocket, Charlie, do you think there's a rocket?"

"There's a rocket, Jack. It's lying right there on the table, sitting right there, with a round band of tin with a hole in it and some wiring ſticking out."

"What do I do, Charlie?"

"You're in charge, you go to your room, grab the rocket and take it outside and ſtand up on the roof, climb up and open that rocket up, fire it up, throw the nozzle out and fire it, and shoot down this bad, evil, horrible man, and it'll blow him away!"

"Oh, Charlie, Charlie, Charlie... I'm so glad you're here. I've got a plan, a great plan! And we're going to do it right now!"

"Yeah? Yeah?"

And Charlie flew off into the sky, and Jack stood up, grabbed the rocket that Charlie had given him, and got out on the roof, the rocket flying,—flying over the mansion of Mr. Harry Goodwin, and there was the rocket, firing a round into the sky, a rocket falling down, and the rocket falling down, and it was Charlie's rocket falling down, and it was Charlie shooting his rocket down. And Jack climbed off the roof of the Goodwin mansion. And the rocket fell down, and it exploded, and there was the rocket in pieces on the lawn of Mr. Goodwin's mansion, the piece that was a rocket, exploded and blew it into bits. And Jack was happy:

"Oh the wonders of having a canon!" He cried.

And Jack jumped back onto the roof of the Goodwin mansion. And he knew now the things that Charlie knew: Charlie was flying his rocket, and he was going to shoot down Mr. Goodwin, and it was going to blow him away. It was going to blow him away, the evil, horrible man. And Jack was happy.

Mr. Harry Goodwin was going to get blown and then Charlie and Jack were going to blow him out of the sky. And that's what happened, the great plan of Charlie and Jack, it happened. Charlie and Jack shot their rockets down into the air, and Charlie's rocket was going. What had Goodwin done? Who cares? Goodwin fell off a building and smashed into pieces. Then Charlie and Jack were going to say hello to his wife and twenty daughters, because that's what good neighbors did,—was say hello—while they blew him away. They blew him away, because that was what good neighbors did, blow away evil people. And the evil, horrible man was blown away. And Charlie blew him away.

Jack & Charlie and the Cigar Box. Cap. VIII.

O I Jack."

"Yeah, Charlie?"

"What's so special about that cigar box of yours, anyways?"

"It's quite simple really, dear Charlie, it just helps to make my mind think a little quicker. What do you think of that?"

"Any box of cigars would do that, come on, why the coyness, Jack?"

"Because, Charlie, that box is never the same twice. It doesn't mean anything unless you put your heart into it."

"Who'd you get that from?"

"The age of the box, Charlie, is in the name of the owner."

"Well then, what's his name?"

"His name's Jack, of course. It's mine. It's me."

"Jack my boy, is my cigarette pack here special?"

"It's special because it belongs to you."

"You should write that down somewhere."

"I'm working on it, Charlie."

"You think you're a writer, eh Jack?"

"Sometimes, Charlie,—I've been a writer all my life."

"Well then, write something for me."

"You bet, Charlie."

"How will you begin the book?"

Jack considered the question and said:

"I'm going to put something inside."

Charlie thought about that for a moment.

He looked into the box.

"What you put inside, it's the most important thing."

"Why's that, Jack?"

"Because, well, I reckon that's the only thing there is to say. I'm going to put a hundred dollar bill inside."

"Why's that, Jack?"

"Why's that?" said Jack, puzzled, "well I reckon if it wasn't in there, it would be something else. You see, it's the only thing there is to say, it says it all."

"Well said, dear Jack."

Jack smiled.

"Where'd you get the hundred dollar bill?"

"From outside the cigar box."

"Outside? Did you get it from the outside?"

"Inside the cigar box."

"Hey, Jack, did you take that hundred dollar bill out of my cigarette pack?"

"Not exactly."

"What do you mean?"

"Not exactly, Charlie."

"Do you know what's inside the cigar box?"

"Oh yes, I do know, and I won't be the one telling you what's in there."

"Then why don't you tell me, Jack?"

"Because I'm not the one who is always doing the telling."

Charlie snorted:

"Where'd you get the hundred dollar bill, Jack?"

"A hundred dollar bill was in the cigar box, Charlie, of course there was."

"Then how did you get it out?"

"Well I did, Charlie, didn't I?"

"That's the best you can do? You couldn't help me?"

"No, not at all, I couldn't."

"What's inside, Jack?"

"I've got something better than the hundred dollar bill, Charlie: There's a photograph that's inside."

"What's a photograph inside the cigar box?"

"What's inside the cigar box is a photo. There's a photograph inside the cigar box. There's a picture inside the cigar box. It's a picture of you. It's me and you, and we're in the Great Smokey Mountains. In the picture you're young, you're still wearing your horn-rimmed glasses and you have your cheeks all puffed up like something in the cartoons. And your face is all flushed, and the sun is shining on your skin and I'm looking at you with a big grin on my face, and there's a big cigar in my mouth."

"And you wrote inside this cigar box that you're going to put a hundred dollar bill inside, Jack, but that it would be important because it would be the only thing that's ever been there. It's the only thing there is to say."

"Yes, Charlie."

"Do you think that's true?"

"I know it is, Charlie."

"Then how come you didn't put it inside the cigar box?"

"How come I didn't put it inside the cigar box, Charlie?"

"You don't think I'm good enough?"

"Charlie, you're the best... You are the best."

"Do you believe that, Jack?"

"I believe it, Charlie."

"So I'm going to do it, Jack, I'm going to put a hundred dollar bill inside."

"What's inside, Charlie?"

"Inside the cigar box is something. It's my cigar, Jack."

"It's your cigar?"

"It's my cigar, Jack."

"And I've got another one too, Charlie."

"It's not yours, Jack, it's mine."

"It's your cigar, Charlie, that's true."

They considered the vista before them, the two of them, on the edge of the canyon. A small speck on the northern horizon began to grow steadily, and then an orange triangle, and then, rapidly, the triangle became a centimeter wide, and then a kilometer, and then, at last,—the Earth.

"It's out there, Jack," said Charlie, "look."

Jack stared at the spot, but he didn't see anything.

Charlie snorted:

"It's getting closer."

"I know it is, Charlie."

"What's out there, Jack?"

"I'm going to give it a few more minutes."

"Are you, Jack?"

"I'm giving it a few more minutes, Charlie."

The horizon was now a ridge, and a thin wedge of solidified water was visible below the lip of the ridge. Then the wedge began to tear, and Charlie's smile died away. A dark pool bloomed below in the wedge's canyon.

Jack stood up and stepped away from the canyon's lip. He felt a sudden wave of cold air and looked up to see a pillar of

light rising above the peaks and ridge, and then the world became a burst of light and the pillars coalesced into the shape of a single point of yellow light, illuminated by a single drop of water. He heard the high pitched sound of his own breathing, and then he put a hand to his chest.

"What is it?"

"What is what?"

"The light."

"It's the Sun."

"So what?"

"Look, Charlie, look up."

The light grew. It was large, very large, and it filled the entire sky. It was the light of the Sun. He could make out a small disk around the light, as if the Sun were itself a tiny speck of light.

"Oh, Charlie, Charlie."

"Oh, Charlie, Jack."

"It's huge," Jack whispered, and he held out a hand and pointed, "Charlie, look, see?"

"Jack, it's the Sun... I knew you could do it! I knew you could."

"It's the Sun! It's the Sun!"

"It's all there, Jack, it's not the hallucinations, it's all there. The leaves, the river, the trees, the grass, the mountains, the streams, the buildings, and everywhere in the middle, it's the Sun."

"It's not the Sun... it's not the Sun."

"Oh, Jack, it's the Sun, Jack. I knew you could do it."

"What's not the Sun?"

"It's the planet! It's the planet!"

"The planet!" Jack groaned, "the planet's not the planet."

"What?"

"The planet's not the planet!"

"Why not?"

"I told you, it's not the planet."

The planet, or whatever it was, winded down. The planet, or whatever it was, swelled once more, and then the planet's light faded to black, and then became a slow circle that left behind

only a thin and flickering band of green. Then, the black area, which was the planet, dissipated and the only light was the light of the Sun.

"It's out there, Jack, look."

Jack felt a sudden surge of relief. The planet was out there. It was as real, as it was before. He could breathe again. He could feel his heart beating. He looked at Charlie, who fell backward, his feet flying out into empty space, and he began to laugh. He laughed so hard that Jack thought he was going to be sick.

Charlie's bald head whipped back and forth and his laughter echoed across the canyon and into the snow-filled air. He laughed so hard he was crying, until his laughter stopped, and he dropped his hands to his side and stared up at the sky.

"Oh, Jack, it's the planet," he whispered, "it's the planet, It's the planet..."

Jack took his eyes from Charlie and stared at the planet that had been the Sun. It was smaller than he had thought it would be. The light was silver and bright, but it was bright in a way that was somehow different. It was soft and it was full of light. It was a circle of light like the one around the edge of a teardrop.

"It's what we wanted." Charlie said, his voice quivering with the desire to speak.

"But why is it smaller?" Jack said.

Charlie sighed: "Because you told me it was."

"But why?"

"Because the world's bigger, it's always been bigger."

"Why didn't you tell me before?" Jack asked.

"I told you it would be big," Charlie shook his head, "it's huge, it's huge and it's real. It's all I ever wanted, it's the best thing in the world."

"Are we going to go there, Charlie?"

"No," Charlie said.

Jack was quiet for a moment.

"When you tell me, I tell you," he paused for a moment, "so I guess we don't get to see the planet, huh?"

"What's next?"

"Why don't we go home?"

"I want to go."

"I know you do, I'm just saying, you don't have to now."

"I want to go," Charlie said again, "it'll be better there, Jack, it'll be real and it'll be warm, it'll be somewhere I can go to sleep."

Jack looked at him and smiled: "You know what would be better than going home?.. Going home... again."

Charlie considered the thought. He looked around. The planet was gone, it had disappeared into the blackness around them, but he didn't care anymore. He had a home waiting for him, and a new world was waiting for him, and it was everything he ever wanted.

"So what do we do?" Charlie asked.

"Something," said Jack.

Jack & Charlie Explore a Ruin. Cap. IX.

THe influence of white russet in autumn, the yellow gold of the crags, the redness of the sunset,—were not yet known to man, or, in all probability, the eyes that looked upon them.

In that part of the world where the pale-blue moors met the deep, shaggy dark wood, in that everlasting sea of moss and rock and falling rock, those wild animals which must wander out of their country and exist among man, must forever see, as if it were spring, and leave, as if it were winter,—with no thought as to weather, or season, or time of day. But as the winter days passed the ideas, the conceptions of a man, about himself and his world,—were born. He came, he saw, he did; he thought, he made judgments, he reflected, he must think again. He reeled in wonder at what a state he had come to: The silent, uncertain track of light, the shining in a gray-blue misty sky.

This was the broken land known as England. The great river, which was called the Thames, ran right into the country, and its thick green waves and foam now ran into the sea, never to return from whence they came.

Jack and Charlie paused in the wild light of the sunset on the

edge of the village. The storm-paint of the Norman church glowed onto the background of the purple hills.

"What does it mean," Charlie said, "to be a man, Jack?"

Jack paused and swallowed the last mouthful of his wine:

"A man," he said slowly, "is... it is... to be a person... a man, what was a man? A man... is a human being."

Charlie tilted his head to one side:

"But what is a human being?" He asked, "if I may, what is man, and what does he do? What is man?"

"He's a thing, man is a thing."

"So he is a thing?" said Charlie.

"Yes, just that."

"And yet, and yet, what is a thing?"

"A thing is something that does something."

"Is it?"

"That's right."

"So that's what I am."

"Yes."

"Then, what are you? I mean, I'm you, I am you," Charlie went on quickly, as if suddenly remembering the point at which the conversation began, "but what is I? I, you, I? What is I?"

"I am you," said Jack.

"But what is me? What is man?"

"It is what I am."

"But what is me? I mean... I am me."

"A thing is a thing."

"But I am,—*me*."

"But what is me?"

"You are who you are."

"But I am-"

"A thing is," said Jack, shortly, "something to be."

Charlie swallowed his wine, and said nothing. Then, after a moment, he went on:

"Why don't you have a drink of whiskey?"

"Drink of what?"

"Drink whiskey, I've got a bottle of it back there."

Jack looked a bit nervous, as he went to fetch the bottle; an old Chinese recipe: "Nargine Herbal Whiskey," which the Swiss people called "Swiss Eagle-Nectar." He was reluctant to touch it, but it was necessary, and he also felt that, if anything, it was the other way round—he should take it, for if he didn't, he was not going to go on drinking, and the water, in which he had been floating previously, would be more drinkable to him.

He went back to the tent and took out the bottle.

Charlie had been sitting by the fire, holding his hands in his lap, and frowning a little,—thinking hard. Then he took one of his hands out of his lap, looked at it, and went into the tent where Jack was.

"Why are we here again, Charlie?" Asked Jack, quietly.

"I don't know, Jack."

"I don't know either," said Jack, looking at a bottle of Raki, and wondering what to do with it. He couldn't give it to Charlie, and yet he felt that he must give it to Charlie, or else there was no use to drinking. He had been surprised by Charlie at the beginning of the evening, shocked, so it seemed to him, that he had gone up to the top of the Mont Blanc, for no apparent reason, and had come down again in an unfathomable mood. He tried to think about what he was thinking about, and couldn't, —but thought instead about the Raki, and thought that he was wrong to be drinking it, for it was bad.

"Yes," he said to Charlie, "you're wrong about that. I drink, that's all, and sometimes I drink too much. And when I drink too much I try to make up for it, by drinking something better, like this,—which I just took out of the tent."

"What is this, the water?"

Jack picked up the bottle, tilted it, and took a deep breath. Then he turned to Charlie and said:

"It's Turkish water, Raki. Honestly, it's quite thematically appropriate, we are here, after all, to excavate the multilayered ruins of humanity."

"Raki," said Charlie, looking at the bottle, and then up at Jack's face.

Jack thought: "Yes, I'm doing well here. I am the man, you are the animal. The animal that is a man. I am the man and you are the thing. I am a thing too. You are a thing. I am the thing. The *thing;* is there a difference? See, that's the thing..."

Charlie thought: "Man, man, man."

"It's an alcoholic drink," Jack said, as he opened the bottle and poured some of the amber liquid into a cup, and then the rest into his own glass.

Charlie cleared his throat:

"Oi, jack, I gotta ask, what do you mean by 'history?' "

"Well, Charlie, once, your ancestors, under the rule of the Romans, built a reliquary not far from here, but then the *Tuareg* raided it, centuries ago, which caused a chain reaction. But, the thing is, not only did they leave some relics behind, they left some of their own behind too. Eventually the Turks... hey, they were here before the Romans, were they not?"

"Well, yes, but-"

"There's another chain reaction, it's about all the cultures that arrived from the East at various times over the centuries. Charlie, think about all the cultures that have left their mark on good old England, and Britain at large: The Saxons, the Vikings, the Celts, the Angles, the Jutes, the Normans, the Danes, the Saxons again, the Normans again, the Turks, the Moors, the Arabs, the Georgians, the The Chinese-"

"The Chinese? Which dynasty was that again?"

"That was the Qinding dynasty, if you want to know."

"That's a dynasty of tea and silk and fireworks, really not a dynasty at all, I daresay."

"Which is a very good thing, if you ask me, especially when you consider that this was before the Romans, you see? Which means that, if you want to go around assuming that there is only one kind of culture, well, think about the notion of absolute cultural homogeneity, and then take a look at the world at large. How many empires, both today and in the past, can one begin to really define as one culture? I mean, do you even know the difference between a Guyanese man and a Kenyan man, for

instance, because the Guyanese and the Kenyan were essentially the same people, are they not?"

Charlie laughed:

"Only if you would call Englishmen and Welshmen and Scotsmen and Scotswomen and Irishmen and Irishwomen,—the same people. Really, you're exaggerating if you say that all cultures are the same."

"Exactly," Jack said, "that's my point, being English—being a man—is far too complicated of an identity. The best way to do away with such complications, is to embrace the truth that we are all disparate things that arise in and out of existence under the auspices of Allah. It's all very well, saying that some cultures are better than others, but if you dig into the reality, you will discover that the superior ones are far easier to crumble than the inferior ones, that it takes far less time to overthrow the ruling elites, and that the subaltern will always be there to overthrow the ruling elites, again and again, ad infinitum, every generation, all over the world."

"Yeah, well, tell me this, Jack."

"I'm listening."

"Are there any truly superior cultures? You know, like, I think the British are way better at knitting or something like that. But then, look here, the Scots are better at crossword puzzles, and the Aztecs are better at colonizing the world, because they are by nature conquerors. Perhaps it is only the clever ones who are really superior to others, and even the clever ones might not know it themselves."

"Charlie, I have two sisters, one likes to take long walks, and the other one likes to run short distances. Who is better? Neither of them, because both of them, they're both *equally* better. They're just different, they do different things, but they both do the same thing, and they each get the same reward. But this is the thing about being a man, especially an Englishman: We have to recognize our faults. You could not begin to call the British—or any other western culture, for that matter—the *best* at anything, but we are the best in ways that are not recognized by our

Eastern counterparts: We understand how to listen, to look at people and not be afraid of them, we don't want to impose our views on them or tell them what to do, and we don't get overly emotional. We don't need to have good argument before we're able to reach a consensus."

"You've really convinced me, Jack, let's start digging!"

And so the two were off, and, eventually, Jack unearthed some fossils buried beneath the sands of time, the first American tribes that found their way to Britain in the early centuries of the Common Era. Before long, they were excavating the rivers that formed the spine of the country. Jack explained how the different cultures found themselves surrounding the metropolis, often coming to blows, but never conquering it. For while they were surely inferior to those who ruled the land, they were also constantly driven to find new means of maintaining their hold on the country, fighting one another for territory and power.

By Jack's estimate, these indigenous tribes were the first to plant European crops, made cloth, constructed cities, brewed ale, invented chalk, and utilized geometry and religion. He also knew that they were the first to have written books, and to invent writing.

"The first people in the world to write on parchment, the Minikinians."

Charlie stared at Jack.

"Let's not talk about those blokes right now, alright? I still get weird dreams about them."

He plunged a pickaxe into the side of a chest, which he revealed to be hollow, as a split in the fabric of the chest provided space for a lump of coal to become trapped, but the coal was revealed to be filled with moldy, black ash, and Jack had to drag it all out, once the chest was opened. Inside the chest was a chair and a book, and the book had the inscription:

I've got in I've got in,
Bang, Bang, Bang.

Charlie ran his hand across the printing, which read:

Fuck off.

"This is some good shit, Jack."

He turned the cover, the frontispiece depicted a naked man and woman, both sprawled out on a mattress, with a candle burning in the background. Inspecting it carefully, he pieced together the meaning and significance of the writing.

The inscription beneath read:

You know how to use this thing.

"This is so cool..." Charlie stared at the man and woman.

"We have no idea who they are."

"I know, Jack, but let's look inside the book; the writing in here doesn't match the handwriting on the front."

The book's inside pages were filled with strange drawings and a peculiar language, and Charlie suddenly felt a chill run up his spine:

"What the hell is this?"

He kept staring at the book for a moment, but Jack was quicker, he produced a microscope, which had a strange mechanism that let it be focused in a specific direction. Jack used the apparatus to look closely at the characters on the inside pages.

"See these symbols? They're being used as placeholders, like we'd use lettering on a letterhead. As far as we know, this is the only copy of this book, so we should learn as much from it as we can."

Jack shone the light of the microscope on the unknown characters.

"Now these lines," he pointed them out to Charlie, "these aren't letters, they're circles. Look at them close-up."

Charlie held his hand up so he could see the image.

"They're written in some weird language, huh?"

"Yeah, this is a different alphabet. Look at the writing pattern for these letters: 'V-V-V-V;' look at the circle."

Charlie nodded:

"Yeah, that's a real circle, what is it?"

"This is called a helix. The symbol for 'I' is the number 4."

"So is this a book about some secret society? Like *The Brotherhood* or something?"

"Well, let's take a look inside the book."

Jack put the scan of the lettering and the scribbled characters aside, and took out a cylindrical tube, which seemed to be made of cork and with a handle protruding from one end. He held the strange tube between his fingers, and blew out a puff of air, like blowing on a birthday candle.

A dull *clack* sound emanated from the tube, and within seconds, a long, spiral-shaped scroll rolled out of it, and Jack put the tube down. It was about five feet long, and the tip of the scroll was capped with an object shaped like an inch and a half-long egg, with one side protruding from it.

A flash of memory ran through Charlie's mind:

"When I was five, I took some bits of plaster down from a wall in the house I grew up in. It wasn't anything special, just some old sheet-rock, but I somehow knew I could do something with it.

I left it by the stove, took my dad's old club out of the garage, and grabbed one of the poker keys my dad kept hidden for emergencies. I figured that one of these keys would open the piggy bank,—I was *right.*

When I opened it up, I found hundreds of dollars in a nest of bills, coins, and dog-ears... I don't know how I knew that, but I did."

"That must have been cool."

"It sure was, I felt so powerful, I was five years old. It felt like something was being taken from me though, and I didn't understand that at the time, I just felt weird.

Later on, my mom and I realized that I didn't know what I did with the stuff in that nest, or how to spend the money, and she wanted me to know that those things weren't going to make me rich."

Jack smirked:

"And look at you now. How about you turn to the next page while I inspect this scroll?"

Charlie did so.

The second page appeared to be another note, or perhaps a poem. Charlie read it aloud:

O wonder, what hath time wrought.
O wonder, what spells the passing of years.
—The Winged Messenger,
Hermit of the Prickly Pear.

"That must be the poet who wrote this book."

Charlie nodded:

"I see what you mean, 'The Winged Messenger' makes sense, but who was the 'Hermit of the Prickly Pear'? Where and what is the Prickly Pear?"

"Maybe this scroll will tell us," Jack said.

Neither he nor Charlie were under the impression tha it would, and, furthermore, they were not particularly interested in the answer.

The scroll began to wind down, as if it were being wound by an invisible hand, and Jack read aloud the following words:

And in that place, I saw a time,
When the Golden Flower would unite all people.
Then the Sorceress would dance with the King,
As the World was made anew.
But neither the King nor the Sorceress would be content.
They would beat the drums and shout to the heavens.
Great song, which will last, until the heart is healed,
Until the path is cleared, until the world is whole.

Jack appeared to be lost in thought as he read.

Charlie, however, was engrossed:

"This has got to be the lyrics of a song!"

"What's it say about that Golden Flower?" Jack asked, "what's it supposed to mean?"

"Well, in China, the Golden Flower is a very famous fruit. It grows in the mountains of Qinghai, Tibet, and Xinjiang. The older a person is, the higher the mountain they live on. It's the part of the body that's connected to the soul, I think. The poems and prayers refer to the Golden Flower as the 'Queen of the Universe.' The light of the Golden Flower was the light that

guided the first disciples to the Golden Temple. That Golden Flower is supposed to be a cross between an orange, a banana, and a tiger lily... I wish I could grow one in my backyard."

"There's one kind of flower that might be like that," Jack said, "but the ones I've seen are purple."

Charlie frowned:

"Oh well, that's still pretty cool."

Jack began reciting another poem:

Won't you open your mind to the visions you will see?
Through the mystic channel of words and lines,
And insight and wisdom that only you and I share.
Open your heart and share your intimate wisdom
With all of humanity, and do not doubt;
For what is, is not what was, but what will be.
Then will the days of glory of the Golden Flower Return.

"So, what does all this mean?" Charlie asked.

Jack looked at Charlie for a moment, then back at the scroll:

"Fuck if I know, bruv."

Charlie glanced back at his book. He turned the page again, this time, the words were in English, and it read:

Shit, urine, wee-wee. Door handle, hole, way.
How to hide a key. Stains of passion,
Heart's desire. Love's creed.
That's the whole nine yards.
Motherfucking stenographer's handbook.

Jack was leaning over, trying to understand what this meant.

Charlie seemed entirely informed, however:

"Fuckin' A!" Charlie shouted, jumping to his feet.

"You found the fucking meaning!?" Jack exclaimed, covering his eyes, "what the hell was in those scrolls, huh?"

"Look," Charlie said, taking the scroll and holding it close to Jack's face, "there are lyrics, right? When you find the song's meaning, you're meant to read it aloud."

"So what's it say?"

"Well, look at this part, right here, for instance."

Jack squinted at the paper,—it was nearly indecipherable.

"Look at the text," Charlie continued, lowering the scroll and pointing it out to Jack.

Jack read it carefully. The text was in Chinese, it read:

人配业論。

"That's right," Charlie, said, "*The Theory of Human Assignment,* it was a project the Chinese were working on for multiple dynasties. The idea was to correlate the body and the mind with the five senses and the five elements."

"Why?" Jack asked.

"Because they wanted to create a perfect model of the body, to allow future humans to be immortal. They figured we'd be able to reprogram our body to live for all eternity."

"So how did they do it?"

"Right, the government ordered each one of them to measure themselves, go to the Imperial Study, and have their flesh removed. Then the government's testing departments would determine who was genetically perfect, who could live for one thousand years, and so on."

"Did it work?"

Charlie laughed: "Clearly not, it's part of why the Chinese lost their grasp on Britain."

"So, this prickly pear... how does it fit together?" Jack asked, pointing to the text.

"Well, the Romans brought it to Britain some time ago, they called it a 'Cacta.' The Mayans called it 'Yage,' the Aztecs called it 'Cociem,' the Hawaiians call it 'Piku,' and so on and so on. All civilizations and peoples in the world who have knowledge of the internal and external world have come to recognize the potency of the fruit. But the Britons,—they just stuck to eating it as an antioxidant and vitamin."

"Well," Jack said, "it should be easy enough to find some."

He went out, and sure enough, returned with a pair.

"So how do we use it to find the meaning of the song?"

Charlie grinned wickedly:

"Let's take a bite and see what happens."

The two men ripped open the prickly pears and took a bite each, their eyes alight with excitement and hunger for knowledge. Immediately, they felt an intense rush of energy coursing through them, driving them forward with newfound vigor and determination.

Following the text on the scroll, they soon found themselves in an underground tunnel leading to an ancient ruin. As they delved deeper into the ruin, Jack and Charlie felt as if something powerful was calling out to them from within its depths, beckoning them on towards the Truth.

They reached a large chamber at the center of the ruins, where they both sensed that something great had once transpired there. The room was enormous, and there was no longer any trace of the walls that used to hold it up. There stood an altar, adorned with columns of stone, which rose high above them. Before the altar, however, was a single, massive pillar that seemed to be made entirely of metal. In fact, it was so immense and so perfectly polished that it appeared to be made entirely out of silver.

Upon closer inspection, Jack noticed that the pillar was actually composed of small pieces of metal, most likely bronze. The entire thing had been fashioned into a circle, with every piece fitting together in such a way that no gaps remained. The ring itself was incredibly smooth, and Jack couldn't help but wonder if it had once served as a seat for a king.

"Who built this?" Charlie asked.

Jack looked around, they were alone, save for a few rats scurrying along the ground.

"I don't know," Jack said, turning to Charlie.

"Jack," said Charlie, "you never finished detailing who else conquered Britain."

"No, I guess I didn't. Well, I'll just start from the beginning."

Jack told Charlie about how, after the Chinese lost control of Britain, the Romans occupied England, and how the island fell under Roman rule. After about three hundred years of occupation, the Romans began to decline, and the Britons rose up and

rebelled against them. They formed an alliance with the Saxons, who invaded the western shores of the island, and eventually drove the Romans out in about four hundred years.

"What about the Tuareg?"

"The Tuareg galvanized the Britons and the Saxons. The Tuareg gave the Britons a new sense of unity and purpose. Together, they defeated the Roman Empire. That's why some parts of Britain are partially desertified. The Tuareg's were shipping in sand by the boat-load, in an attempt to make themselves feel less homesick."

"I think you are overvaluing the contribution of the Britons and the Saxons, Jack. I think Britain just became less valuable as a colony to the Romans. It wasn't because they suddenly got some sort of spirit, it was simply because they didn't have the manpower to maintain their empire anymore; they were losing soldiers by the thousands."

"Well, I'm certainly not going to argue with you," Jack said.

Charlie raised his eyebrow at that, then he turned his attention back to the ruins. They clearly showed an array of influences: Chinese, Celtic, Norman, Roman, Turkish, and Moorish. As they examined the ruined walls and pillars further, they realized that these influences blended together in a rather unique and complex manner.

The two men began to hear a faint ticking sound, coming from somewhere in the distance.

"What's that?" Jack asked.

Charlie pointed: "Do you see that?"

Jack turned and saw a small crack in the wall. He knelt down beside it, and pushed, revealing a secret staircase.

He motioned for Charlie to follow him.

There was no more strange light emanating from the cracks in the walls, however, as they descended into the darkness, they could feel the air growing colder. Jack felt goosebumps forming on his arms and legs, and when he looked back up, he saw the shadows stretching, elongating, reaching out towards them.

After descending several dozen steps, they finally arrived at a

large chamber. It was illuminated by a single candle, set upon a stone table. On top of the table sat a pile of books, scrolls, and papers. Jack walked over to examine them, while Charlie went to get the candle.

"What are those things?" Jack asked, pointing to the strange objects.

The objects were spheres, made up of different metals, most likely iron, copper, tin, and lead. Each sphere had a series of holes drilled through it, allowing the liquid inside to flow freely.

Jack went over to inspect them.

Charlie began flipping through the books, papers, and scrolls. They had many uses, according to the scrolls,—for example, the one closest to him contained a recipe for a health tonic, and another was devoted to the art of astrology. He picked up a third, which was written in French, and it explained how to make a simple vinaigrette. The fourth contained a map of the Middle East, the fifth, a history of Scotland, the sixth, a primer on heraldry, and so on and so forth.

Jack knelt to take a closer look at the spheres. He ran his finger around the edge of the first one, and it was warm to the touch. When he rotated it, the liquid inside splashed out and sprayed across his hand. The liquid smelled vaguely like vanilla. He looked around him, all the others were filled with water.

Jack placed the sphere back onto the table, and picked up another. He ran his finger around the surface of it, feeling the warmth, then he pressed his thumb down on the side, and it burst open, spilling out the contents. The liquid was clear, and it tasted of lemon and mint.

The liquid began to drip off the sides, as Jack put it back on the table. He looked around the room and noticed a book resting on a nearby shelf.

"This is interesting," Charlie said, picking up the book and flipping through its pages, "it's a copy of a book called 'The Alchemist's Dream,' it describes a vision the author had about a man who discovered a method for transforming lead into gold."

Jack pulled the second sphere off the table. This time he

bent down and poured the liquid into a glass bowl he had found nearby, filling it halfway, then he took a sip, and immediately spat it back out in disgust.

"What's wrong?" Charlie asked.

"It tastes terrible, and it burns my throat."

"Well that doesn't bode well."

Charlie picked up a sphere and held it in front of his face.

He sniffed it.

"What is it?" Jack asked.

Charlie shook his head:

"I can't tell, it smells nice though."

Charlie took a drink of the liquid, and smiled:

"Mint julep!"

"How do you know?"

Charlie took another sip:

"I've always liked mint juleps."

Jack then took a taste himself, and instantly spat it out.

"What the hell?" He said, "that stuff tastes awful!"

Charlie sniggered:

"You're a tough guy, aren't you?"

Jack scowled at him:

"What are you laughing at?"

Charlie took another sip.

"Well, it's just that I knew you'd hate it."

Jack gave him a sidelong glance:

"Why do you say that?"

"Because you're British."

Jack laughed: "Is that supposed to make me feel better?"

Charlie took another sip: "Actually, it does."

Jack picked up the book Charlie had been reading. He read the title: "The Alchemist's Dream," the author was apparently named "Henry."

Jack flipped through a few pages, until he came to a section that caught his eye. There was a passage from a letter the author wrote to his friend "Arthur," describing how he had discovered something truly remarkable. Jack leaned in close to read it:

Dear Arthur,
I have recently discovered a curious new substance. The properties of this substance allow it to be transformed into anything imaginable. In fact, I believe I have found the secret to turning lead into gold. With this discovery, we will be able to finance our military operations for decades, perhaps centuries. Our enemies will be powerless against us! What makes this substance so special? It is similar to the substance of which you spoke to me earlier. In fact, it may even be the same substance. But unlike yours, mine can be used to transform into anything,—all depending on your imagination. I am sure that you will also discover what I have discovered. Perhaps when we meet, I can teach you this secret of mine. I know that you too will be eager to share this knowledge with those around you. Indeed, I have already begun spreading word of it. Many people have come to me to learn this secret. And since my discovery, many more have joined their number. Soon, everyone will know of it. Once this happens, the world will change forever!
—Best Regards, Henry.

Jack stopped reading. He stared at the page in disbelief.
"What is it?" Charlie asked, "did you find something?"
Jack nodded:
"Yes, but not what I expected."
"What do you mean?"
Jack put the book down:
"This is a fake."
Charlie turned a few pages back: "A fake?"
"Yes, a fake, the author was *Henry*."
"Are you serious?"
Jack nodded:

"He has a signature at the bottom, and there's another letter from him."

"And?"

"And," Jack said, "the author claims to have discovered a secret about lead."

Charlie looked up at Jack:

"How do you know this isn't the real deal?"

Jack shrugged:

"Look at it this way, if you were in possession of a secret that would change the course of human history, would you just write it down in a letter?"

Charlie nodded:

"That makes sense... You're right, you wouldn't want to reveal your secret in such a public way."

Jack continued reading, and after a moment said:

"If you had access to this secret, you would keep it a secret for as long as possible, your goal would be to keep it for yourself, and use it to enrich yourself and your friends. That's why I suspect that this book is a fake."

"So what's the point of writing a fake book?"

"So jackasses like us could be lead on a merry goose chase, like the poor fools who bought this book."

"Sounds like fun," Charlie said.

"Indeed, now let's get out of here."

As they started climbing back up the stairs, they heard a loud clattering noise. They turned around, and saw a giant shadow approaching, it was about the size of a bus.

"Jack!" Charlie cried.

The shadow approached them quickly, until it stopped only a few feet away. Jack could now see that it was a massive metal statue, made up of hundreds of pieces. Parts of it were rusting, some parts were shiny and new. It had two arms, each with a hand attached. One arm had a hammer, and the other had a sickle.

Charlie squinted: "What in the heavens-"

Suddenly, the statue's arms began to rotate, making it look

like it was wielding a pair of axes. The statues' eyes opened, revealing yellow eyes. Its mouth opened wide, revealing rows of sharp teeth.

"Mary, mother of Jesus," Charlie said, crossing himself.

The statue began to walk forward, with slow, awkward steps.

Charlie put his hands on his head in fear:

"I'm not meant for this! I'm done with the occult! I'm done with this kind of thing!"

Jack wasn't ready to give up just yet. He pulled a gun out of his pocket, and pointed it at the statue:

"We'll see about that."

He began to pull the trigger, but he found that the safety was still on. Charlie tried to help him, but he was shaking too badly.

The statue began to make loud clicking noises, like gears grinding against each other.

Jack and Charlie felt the ground begin to shake.

"Can't you do something?" Jack said.

Charlie looked around, and saw a piece of metal pipe on the ground next to him.

"Yes, I think I can," he said.

He grabbed the pipe and raced towards the statue. He raised the pipe, and with all his might, he brought it crashing down on the statue's head. The metal rang out with a metallic clang, and pieces of the statue flew everywhere.

The statue staggered backwards, but didn't fall completely. It turned towards Charlie and let out a loud screech.

Despite his supposed fear, Charlie managed to keep his footing and brought the pipe down again with all his strength.

This time, there was a loud cracking noise, as one of the statue's legs broke off from its body. The statue roared, in what appeared to be pain, then charged at Charlie, full speed. But Charlie was quick on his feet, he dodged out of the way at the last moment, leaving the charging construct to smash into a large rock formation.

With its leg broken, it was now much easier for Jack and Charlie to take it down.

The statue flailed, and it managed to hit both Jack and Charlie, who both stumbled back. The statue threw the hammer at Jack, who felt it hit him squarely in the chest.

The statue grabbed a nearby stick and used it as a crutch to shuffle towards Charlie, who had grabbed the hammer.

The statue opened its mouth and said:

"I am the proletariat!" It cried in a booming, robotic voice, "I am the oppressed! I am the working class!"

Charlie looked at Jack in confusion:

"What's it talking about?"

"I don't know," Jack said, shaking his head, "but we have to take it down before it hurts anyone."

He took aim and fired a shot at the statue, but the bullet just bounced off its metal body. The statue roared and continued its hobbled march towards Charlie.

Charlie hefted the hammer and prepared to swing, but before he could, the statue was upon him, swinging its arms wildly.

Charlie was knocked to the ground, and the statue began to stomp on him relentlessly. Jack ran over and tried to pull it off, but it was too strong. Finally, he managed to get a grip on one of the statue's arms, and he and Charlie started to pull.

When Jack and Charlie released their grip, the statue released its hold and walked back a few steps. The lights from the eyes went out, and it began to crack and break. Then, it suddenly split apart into two smaller pieces.

"Jack!" Charlie cried.

"We got him!" Jack shouted, holding the broken pieces.

"Holy shit, that was intense! Let's get out of here, Jack."

The pair grabbed everything they could, and quickly ran out of the ruin.

"Blimey, Jack, did you see that thing? What was that?"

"I don't know, but I don't think we want to find out."

"I think we do, what was it going on about? The 'proletariat,' and all that?"

Jack shrugged: "I don't know."

"I think that's the right answer... let's go back."

As they walked back in relative silence, the two couldn't help but ponder—separately—what made the construct any different from them. What really was a person? What really was a thing? And what really was a dream? And what really was a joke?

Jack & Charlie Become Monks. Cap. X.

LIsten Jack, have you ever heard of the Monastery island in Indonesia? It's a whole island-city that functions as a monastery."

"No I have not, Charlie, tell me about it."

"It is a religious island founded by a Tolai priest who became rich. One day, after years of tremendous toil, he discovered gold on the island. In order to invest his money, the priest had to build an island monastery. This monastery then became a place of pilgrimage for the Indonesian Christo-Buddhists, or whatever you call them. I hear it's magnificent, and I'm wondering, do you think *we* have what it takes to be Orthodox Christian Buddhist monks? Just for a week? You could study Buddhism and take a course in Buddhist philosophy, then study the history of Orthodoxy, and then take a course on Orthodox liturgy. You'd learn a lot,—I mean a lot."

"I don't know, Charlie, that's a lot of stuff, and besides, I've told you I'm still a bit partial to Islam. Besides, could we really avoid drinking and fucking all the time?"

"There is no harm in that."

"That's great, Charlie, that's really great, I really like that. Just a week? Can do, not a problem, I really like that; two weeks? Yeah, I'm in."

"The most extraordinary cathedral in Indonesia is on this island, it's devoted to the Dormition of Mary. The stone carvings there are spectacular, thousands of years old."

"What kind of cathedral is it?"

"It is enormous, really, it covers several hectares. The interior of the monastery is immense, it is, as you probably know, five stories high."

"What does five stories mean? Is that a floor?"

"You're not even trying, are you?"

"I'm sorry, Charlie, I'm just not getting it, five stories?"

"At the base, it is nine stories high, and then there is a lower three-story building and a stone-vaulted fifth story, with rooms carved into the ceiling of each of the three lower floors. There is a large library and a music-lounge. But there are a number of stupas there. It's a whole city built exclusively for monks. The island across it is a city built for nuns, but we can't go there."

"But why are we going to do this exactly?"

"Come on, don't pretend you weren't intrigued by Parmentier's Buddhist Vocation, we're going there for the hell of it, Jack, we're going for the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth... You, me,—that must be clear."

"Sure, I'll be there for the whole truth; that's my motto: Any truth, any way it comes out, anything."

"That's why we'll be going there, not because it's perfect, nothing is perfect."

"I hear you, Charlie, I hear you. One last question: Can you explain to me the dimensions of Indonesian religion? It seems to be a blend of a whole bunch of religions..."

"It is, they revere a bunch of indigenous deities and spirits as Saints or Bodhisattvas, and see the Buddha as a host of the Holy Spirit. It's a mishmash of Polynesian, Mapuche, Australian, and other mythologies, with Christianity and Hindu-Buddhism. But it's so well organized, what with their prayer houses and monasteries, I think of the early Church. You see, they believe that the God of the Koran and the God of the Bible are essentially the same God."

"That is true."

"They worship 'angels,' 'devas,' or 'spirit guides,' and say that the most important thing is to 'have good deeds.' They say that it's very important to do them sincerely. They also say that if you do them in a proper and devout way, you will win great rewards. They even describe God as a being of light, with the understanding that He created the universe as one huge sacred flame."

"You're telling me Zoroastrianism made it's way down to

the Indonesian archipelago? What a trip. Well, Charlie, I'm in, come on, let's go there."

They arrived without incident. The splendor of the island was breathtaking. The monks of the place were hospitable, they welcomed the group into their order, checked the vocation, gave their blessings, and then invited them to a feast. For the next several days, they were immersed in devotion and religiosity. Finally, on the following Monday, they were led to a natural cell in the center of the monastery.

It was a site to behold, the exterior was all carved into a structure that seemed almost to have grown up out of the rock itself. It was made of rammed-earth and earth-covered wood and stone, and each stone was so precisely placed, that it would have taken at least ten men to fill it. On each of its four corners stood gargoyles,—large-headed men, carved to appear to be very old, with long beards and thick, leathery wings, protruding from their backs.

Carved into the stone were statues of various Saints and Bodhisattvas, while the outer surface of the cell was covered with open dirt, the rest of the cell was a sea of soft gold light. The floors and walls of the cell were covered with silk and gold, depicting scenes from Hindu-Buddhist legend, and from the Mahabharata. Many of the scenes showed the gods Vishnu and Brahma and the Aghoris, their most famous devotees. The Bodhisattvas had massive heads and painted eyes.

Above the door, on the right-hand side of the cell, was a depiction of the Arc-Bundh-Vijaya, an image of Brahma riding a bull. He had one arm outstretched, pointing to the heavens, and in his other arm he held the lotus. At the base of his feet was the stone image of Mahapadma Agni, the fire of creation. This image was almost certainly the Fiery Flame of Brahma.

The roof was made of gold-coated wood and decorated with intricate and fantastic peacocks and lotuses. In the center of the cell was a large meditation hall, with a thousand Buddha statues, arranged in a round pattern around the inner wall. It was dedicated to Namkhai Norbu, the Buddha of Compassion. The

inner wall was decorated with the pictures of the great Saints of the order, who all bore the name of the same sacred Supreme Being, as all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas of the world.

This particular one was known as Sukheshvara, the Guru of Wisdom. His picture was made of wood, with tiny nails in the wood. Another was Saint Anthony of Padua, and at the center of it all was a huge cross with Christ and His Saints carved into it.

The altar of the temple was made of hardwood, and had a large prayer wheel surrounded by several large Buddha statues in various kneeling positions.

The interior itself was made of pure gold, each of the outer walls was coated with puffy gold, and each statue was polished until it gleamed like polished ebony.

On the walls were various scenes from the Bible, indigenous myths, and the life of the Buddha. The statues of Christ and Gautama stood out above all the others. In the center of the cell was a circle of gold,—the center of the universe—a boundless universe of God, the Unchanging One.

The balcony that ran around the meditation hall was designed like the top of a turban, which was worn by a great Aghori guru, who was credited with many lives and many achievements. The balcony was covered in crucifixes, crosses, and other religious images. Each of the balconies surrounding the inner wall was covered in a pattern of concentric circles. There were pictures of various Christian Saints, all people dedicated to promoting love and faith. The appearance of each balcony was a different picture, a different one depending on the names of the Saints and the area they were from.

Jack and Charlie walked out to the balcony dedicated to St. Petrus, the patron saint of Europe. The balcony was decorated with many figures, including a broken cross, a carved serpent, and a sleeping dog. On the balcony, Charlie looked down and saw the vista.

It felt like the vista went on forever, and the road slowly wound around and up the hillsides to a great river at the very top of a cliff. It was a roiling, alluring river that followed a series of

rocky ridges. If you looked right and then left, you could see the Island of Bali on one side, and the towering mountain ranges of the Karangasem and Seminyak regions on the other.

As soon as they were seated, the abbot, Pempa Kesuma, walked in, said a quick prayer, and then stood before them, The Englishmen's eyes widened, the abbot took a deep breath and then took out his book.

"And now, what do I do?" He asked, his face set in grim determination, "I give you this book, this book is written in our language. This book contains everything I have been told, this book will tell you how to live your life, everything you need to know. We start here, let me begin... Please read it for yourself."

The Englishmen opened his book and read aloud:

OM! I am the Light that shines on all.
I am the Primordial Mind!
OM! OM! OM!
We make religion. We make many forms.
We create flowers and candles,
We make lamps and statues.
We design, we sculpt, we fashion,
We add to our lives. We stretch, we squeeze,
We prick, we sting, we pound and cut,
We cut and stack, we shout, we chant.
We shout, we chant, we pray we talk.
We read and speak, we touch, we use.
We work and live, and, in this:
I am the All-Merciful!
OM! OM! OM!
Let me know and, in this:
I am Infinite Wisdom
OM! OM! OM! Do the work,
OM! OM! OM! In this way,
OM! OM! OM! Be of One Mind,
OM! OM! OM! Uniting One Mind,
OM! OM! OM! In this way,
OM! OM! OM! Know I.

OM! OM! OM! Have I.
OM! OM! OM! Be Knowing, Aware.
OM! OM! OM! And, in this:
I am Eternal Awareness! OM!
In the name of the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit,
And of God the Father, and of the Mother,
And of God, and of the Moon,
And of the Sun, and of the Sky,
And of the Waters, and of All.
And every god and goddess, Amen.
OM! OM! OM!
I am the Lord, your God.
I am the Primal Witness.
I am the Physical Soul.
I am the great Self-Determining Field.
I am the Ultimate Illusion.
I am the Noosphere.
I am the First Cause.
I am the Supreme Intelligence.
I am the illusory nature of the world.
OM! OM! OM! Let me know.
And in this: I am the All-Merciful! OM!

At that, Jack looked up and, in a voice thick with emotion, said: "I had no idea! I had no idea! Thank you for that. Thank you, Pempa Kesuma, I've been trying to do good, and you are here to show me the way... I will never forget this."

And Pempa Kesuma just nodded, then he gave a slight smile and said: "Here is your book."

The Englishmen looked down at his open hands.

"May you learn peace," Pempa Kesuma said.

And Jack nodded.

He turned to Charlie:

"Say, Charlie, if being a Saint means having a healthy moral system, then you're an infidel."

And Charlie replied, simply:

"We can always try."

Charlie closed his book, he looked up at Jack and said:

"For now, we rest."

"For now," Jack agreed, "but in the meantime, I think I should be writing my dear Kendra about this book I'm reading, —it's very good.

"Oh, certainly," Pempa Kesuma said, "here is the paper, it is yours to record."

That night, they prayed. The procession was in full sway: The Archbishop was swinging the thurible and chanting:

"Holy is the name of God the Light, Holy is the Foundation of the Universe, Holy is the Word of the God of Grace."

And up in the balcony, where a man dressed as a Hindu priest was at work, a white boy in sneakers and green jeans was pounding the backs of two small books with a stick, making endless notes on yellow legal pads.

And a middle-aged man was weeping.

Jack sat in the pew, thinking, and, finally, he said:

"God, whoever you are, may we all be in this house a hundred years from now... that would be a great blessing."

The monks chanted, and the service soon came to an end.

In the darkness, Jack watched the lit windows, and saw, clearly, the watch-headed crows, flying in circles, and the blue flame from the candles, and then the bats began their endless circling. And the bats were the only thing that hadn't changed in all the centuries that passed in this church. And they were still circling, at night, looking for the souls of their forebears, searching, looking, searching.

And Jack said:

"That's a great way to think about the whole universe: Looking for the souls of your forebears."

At that, Pempa Kesuma smiled.

"You know," the Archbishop said, "when Christ was on the Earth, I believe he preached a spiritual awakening. I believe that when he preached the Christian gospel, he taught people to look within themselves for the Holy Spirit, to really take the

word of Amida Buddha for your own. He taught you to look inside, the way you're looking now, for the Holy Spirit."

And Pempa Kesuma said to that: "I would say that, in these modern times, that message is being delivered in the Christian Church by two things: The Word of God, and, more and more, by hope... yes, *hope*."

The Archbishop smiled.

"The Spirit of Christ is not so elusive, Jack, the spiritual ideas of the Kingdom of God are no longer as foreign to us as they once were. The Voice of God is still here, if we look, if we look with open hearts. Perhaps we can learn from his life and teachings, to follow the sayings of Buddha, and the warnings of our Kahunas. When Maui says: 'In truth, no country shall be saved except by the power of work, or by the spiritual principles of Mahayana Buddhism,' and when he says: 'You are mistaken in judging me, I do not practice disease, I do not practice grief, I do not practice hate, I do not practice grief.' When Maui says those things to the Wunamana, I believe we may begin to see the spiritual principles of Mahayana Buddhism in ourselves."

Jack asked Pempa Kesuma: "What should we do?"

"I think we ought to try," Pempa Kesuma said,"we ought to begin our work, the Lord's work, Jack, the *Lord's work.* We've been too busy to do it before, and we are too busy now. We don't know if it will be easy or difficult, but we do know we need to do something, some good,—positive work."

Jack nodded.

"Ahh.. I know you've read my essay on The Tibetan Book of the Dead," Pempa Kesuma said, "you have read it, and I know you've studied the writings of the Kahunas. Are you prepared to take that work into your life?"

"Not really, no," Jack said, "I don't really know if I can really do the things the Kahunas say, or if I'm even ready... it seems like I need to read more."

"It's a sacred book," Pempa Kesuma said, "some people, when they read it, become serious. Some become deep, some

become sad. Some lose their lives, some see angels, but all of them make the journey to the after-world."

"I feel like I should be able to make that journey."

Pempa Kesuma smiled.

"Jack, you may be a deep one," Pempa Kesuma said, "but that is not the mark of the *real man.* The real man is the one who sees the after-world."

Charlie nodded: "Archbishop, have you spoken to any Mapuche or Australian shamans?"

"Why, of course, many dwell here, as monks or priests. At Chavalitetten, a wonderful path of Buddhist studies has been established to educate native Brazilians. And I go twice a year to a remote, gorgeous place, in Paraguay, to a village in the jungle, to see the Lakota Indians, to whom the Land of the Serpent Bearer is still very much alive. But you and I know nothing about these other teachings. At the moment, I am deeply engaged with the Christian notion of holiness, and I would wish you to think about those teachings."

Charlie nodded:

"It seems that what the Kahunas have done, is to put to rest all the spiritual disputes we still have over faith and belief, and morality, and ethics. We don't have to debate with the devil any more, he's been disarmed by our modern scientific and materialistic society. Modern science has disarmed the devil."

"Oh, Charlie," Jack said, "can't we just say: To hell with modern science? Can't we just say that the devil exists, that he wants us all to be miserable, and to be alone, and to be subservient, and that he is always ready to move and to tempt and to destroy us, if we don't listen to his messages?"

"Oh, Jack," Charlie said, "when I hear you, I hear so much of the crazy, old Chinese philosopher... you still have not lost your old-time religion, eh?"

The next few days were days of complete silence, but Jack and Charlie still managed to get into some mischief. Without uttering a word to each other, they snuck off on a boat to the nun island. They rented a rowboat in the harbor, and Jack

rowed with an easy, sure motion, and Charlie, for his part, stared intently at the islands in the distance.

They said nothing to each other, for their vow of silence had not yet expired, yet both wore identical lascivious grins.

They made their way to the island. In contrast to most of the buildings on the monk island, which were made purely out of wood, the nuns' building was made of bricks, and the nuns were wearing heavy black robes.

As they came closer to the entrance, they heard a voice:

"Who dares to approach?"

Jack said nothing. The two of them vanished into the night. They dived into the water, and as the nun came over to inspect, they leapt out of it and held her down, muffling her screams. They started to fuck her, and after Jack's first attempt, they were doing this until dawn, when they grew too tired to keep going and lay still, satisfied and exhausted.

They drowned the nun, drained her blood into the bay, and slipped away. They kept repeating this process for the duration of their vow of silence. And so, by the end of five days, the two of them had laid at least five victims, each one, in total, a tenth of their body weight, each having drained her blood into the bay.

When they finished, the dawn sun was a harsh, bright orb, above them. Jack and Charlie came up out of the water.

"God, this is beautiful!" Jack exclaimed.

"Oh, Jack," Charlie sighed, "I wish we could do this forever."

"Yeah, you, me, the world, all the suffering of all the living. I say we stay here for a few more months and thoroughly investigate the ways of the Indonesian Empire; this religion is so beautiful... why have we forsaken it?"

Jack said nothing.

"Why?" Charlie said.

Jack said nothing.

"Are you feeling anything?"

"I'm feeling great."

"Say something, Jack!" Charlie said, raising his voice.

"Sure."

"You know what I think?"

"What?"

"You know what I think? I think the vow of silence is causing you to loose your grip on reality. We have been silent for five days... How long have you and I known each other?"

"Oh, only two years."

"Two years!? I remember you when you first came here, you were already seeing spirits, you said: 'The world is like a gigantic volcano, and spirits are constantly erupting out of it, pouring from the vents.' I think you started to see spirits even before the vow of silence. I mean, you've been here so long that we've started to turn your into a kind of house spirit... your mind is warped."

"What? You're telling me that you're saying that we are ghosts?"

"I'm saying you are confused. The hours have begun to distort, your form has grown more translucent. Don't you feel it? We're becoming Arhants."

"I know, I feel it, but what does it have to do with us?"

"I feel like the spirit inside me is coming to life. It feels like something in me is growing, like my time has come. But that doesn't mean I'm going to die. I feel... like the Eucharist has come back."

Jack looked confused.

"The Eucharist?"

"The Eucharist, The Body of Christ, Jesus himself came back to us. The celibate vow of silence doesn't mean that we have forsaken the spirit world, it means that we are allowed to see it. The only difference is that we were able to see it from afar, until we began to let the signs of the spirit world seep into our human forms. We could not know for certain that Jesus is in your body, but now we know... The spirit of Jesus is there, the Buddha is there. I feel like I'm getting stronger with each passing hour. I feel like my hunger has become less of an annoyance. I don't mind sleeping the way I used to... I'm beginning to un-

derstand the voids in space and time... I'm beginning to understand the mind."

"You're nuts, you've gone daft."

"I'm not, I'm not nuts. The celibate vow of silence has given me a lot of time to contemplate things, I've realized that my body is special, it's very delicate and precious, like a child's. If I'm going to die, I want to do so with dignity, but I'm not going to die, I'm going to embrace my Buddha-nature and commune with the dream world. And if I die in this plane, it will be with a smile... but not yet... not yet."

Jack spoke, his voice feeble and raspy:

"I don't know, Charlie, I feel like we're becoming the bishops, but are we really men of God?"

Charlie pondered for a moment. He closed his eyes and prayed.

"Brother Charlie?" Jack's tone of voice suggested something that he felt he needed to know.

"Yes, my son, brother Jack?"

"You want to have another go at the nuns? This time we should sneak into their cells."

"Yes, I do, come on, but we should make a roundabout."

They snuck in through a window, one of the panes of glass broken. They were nearly caught, when the nuns of the convent came in to clean. They hid in the cell.

Jack whispered in Charlie's ear:

"If we're caught, we kill them."

Jack crept into the cell and took out two of the three nuns. Then Charlie crept in and brutally smacked the last nun. They started to quietly fuck.

Jack continued, more loudly:

"The Sister has to go, come on, hit her again."

Charlie smacked the nun again.

"That's it, pinch her nipples."

"I don't think she likes that."

Charlie smacked the nun again and again. The nun was screaming now.

"Now pinch her nipples."

Charlie pinched the nun's nipples. The nun was squirming.

"Now pinch her nipples again!"

The nun tried to escape, but Jack was fucking her with such force that she could not escape.

"How about we pinch her nipples again?"

The nun tried to escape again, but Charlie pinched her nipples too hard and she yelled and thrashed in pain.

"Okay, let's leave her alone and just fuck her some more."

Charlie began to rape the nun. The nun tried to scream but was muffled.

"Now your turn," Jack said.

Charlie began to rape the other nun.

"Here, now she's really letting go, hit her harder."

Charlie smacked the nun again and again, and then, he turned and said to Jack:

"Hit her! Hit her harder! Hit her! Hit her harder!"

The nun was moaning and crying. Jack smacked her breasts, he grabbed her arms and legs, and he slapped her face.

Then they killed them. Jack and Charlie then went into the garden, and laid in the shade of a tree, and began to celebrate their actions. Charlie took a toke from his pipe and said:

"Jack, do you think that the Mapuche shamans are correct in asserting that marijuana is a sacrament? Like the Communion wafers?"

"Yeah, I think they are. Look, I don't want to get into all this fine detail of the orthodoxy of the Church, but, yeah, I think it's true, and if it is true, then God's teaching is a little different from those in the Bible."

"God's teaching? What's the different?"

"Well, I think there is a teaching in the Bible that comes to mind. God says not to kill, but I feel that I am already an Arhat. If so, am I going to be reincarnated in a paradise somewhere? We've just killed three nuns and it feels like paradise, so no, I don't think I'm going to be reincarnated as a pious Christian."

"I was thinking about this last night, and this is just an idea I'm not trying to pass on, because it's not anything I'm saying is the truth. But I thought that if the Mapuche shamans are correct in claiming that marijuana is a sacrament, then God has given us this revelation so that we can avoid the violence that the Seven Mortal Sins bring. It is the pure cannabis. If it's something you are going to take and smoke, don't add anything to it... it has no calories, no solvents, no alcohol, it's just pure herb and it will take away that craving, that desire to commit crimes."

The two observed the pile of black dust, that they had procured form one of the pockets of the nuns,—which they were sure was cannabis,—and for a fleeting moment, Charlie was sure he saw the Buddha on the cross, and himself, meditating in a lotus flower growing from his navel.

Jack & Charlie Start a Punk Band. Cap. XI.

About two miles south of Haganville, a new, old residence rose in the barren farmland. It was a pair of brick hovels, with a side-by-side outhouse. In the front of one of the hovels, there was a pail of concrete, a shovel, and a can of blue paint. A pale man with sunken eyes and his ragged, graying beard pasted to his jaw, stepped off the red dirt road into the old, weathered building.

He looked at the paint can, sighed, and then, shaking his head, stepped over to the wall and touched it. He dipped his hand in the bucket and brought out a handful of gray, jagged concrete dust. He used his hands to press the dust onto the gray brick and the pail started to leak. The pail slipped from his grip and fell to the ground. He put one hand to his face, as if to keep the paint from seeping into his eyes.

After he made sure that the paint had a good seal, he walked over to a pipe. With his free hand, he pried the iron from the rusted ground and stuck it through the pipe. He pulled hard. The rusty iron pipe moved, but it did not creak. He then took the iron pipe and rammed it against the wooden wall. The wall pushed open. He then held the pipe up and inspected the wall

behind it. A few nails were loose, but nothing a little blue-painted wood and a busted nail wouldn't fix.

Jack leaned against the side of the house. He crossed his arms and looked at Charlie.

Charlie looked back.

"Where ya going?" Jack asked.

Charlie rolled his eyes and walked across the dirt floor. When he reached the far side, he stopped and turned back. He wiped a piece of sandpaper from his pants and tapped the wall with it.

"I don't know," he shrugged.

"What ya mean, you don't know?"

"We gotta have a band name."

"A name?"

"I've got a stupid band name."

"Right."

"The Hurstpierpoint Polka Band."

"That's stupid, it's already taken."

"I don't know, I'm not even sure we're a band. We're just boys from a small town in the middle of nowhere, who know a few chords. We can't play much, but we're good enough to start a band and get a record deal, so we have to have a name."

Jack tried not to smile, but he couldn't help it.

Charlie always thought of things the most ridiculous way possible, his mind was like a rolling pin that put the dents on the walls of his brain.

A laugh escaped from Jack's throat and he couldn't stop it.

Charlie looked at Jack, and Jack knew he saw him smile.

Charlie then took off his flannel shirt and threw it on the dirt floor. He walked to a light fixture by the door and shut off the overhead bulb.

He came back to Jack and ran a hand through his bald pate, leaving a handful of sandy dirt on his palm.

"Hey Charlie," Jack said, "are you a skinhead?"

Charlie laughed:

"No, I'm not a skinhead, but I do have a tendency to turn my face a bit red when I'm angry."

He tossed Jack the shirt:

"How about: The Angry Skeptical Townie."

"Nah, too generic."

Jack looked at Charlie, waiting for him to say what he was thinking.

Charlie took his hands and tried to smooth the dirt off his palms. When he couldn't touch the sides of his palms, he looked back up at Jack. He cleared his throat.

"Oh, whatever," Jack said.

"It's better than my stupid band name: 'The Naked and Ferocious Surfer Picnics.'"

"Seriously?"

Jack leaned against the house and crossed his arms:

"Seriously."

Jack looked at his shoes, they weren't even dirty:

"I'm not sure why I even told you that."

Charlie looked back up at Jack:

"I think we could do that, like we used to."

Jack looked at Charlie for a minute.

Charlie was staring at him with those curious eyes of his, but Jack couldn't read anything in them:

"You think?"

Charlie nodded, but didn't speak.

He didn't have to.

Jack had seen it in Charlie's eyes, there was something there, something his brain couldn't translate.

"Alright," Jack said.

"I guess I've got two options here," Charlie said.

Jack nodded.

"Two options," Charlie nodded and looked at Jack.

"How about we both agree that if we're going to do it, then we need to do it right. We need to rehearse and we need to do it as often as we can."

"How often?" Charlie asked.

Jack looked at his watch:

"Maybe two or three times a week," he said.

"Three to five days a week."

Charlie took a deep breath, "okay," he said.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out his wallet:

"I'll need two hundred bucks."

"Two hundred bucks, for what?" Jack said.

"When we start playing, for whatever expenses we might have while we're here."

"How much have you spent since you came to Huntington Beach, Charlie?"

Charlie looked down at his feet and pulled out a checkbook: "Only what I've needed to survive... two hundred bucks ain't much."

"When we play, you'll get a percentage, two percent."

Charlie looked at him incredulously:

"Excuse me? What's *your* percentage going to be?"

"Ten percent," Jack said.

"And where does the other eighty-eight percent go to?"

"It's yours, you can use it however you like."

"But you just said-"

"Look Charlie, we aren't gonna become punks for the money, and besides, there isn't any money in punk anymore anyways."

"Jack, how could you say that, punk is, as the kids say, a badge of honor."

"It doesn't have to be; you know what, I was gonna suggest we come up with something else, something that doesn't involve money."

"Any ideas?"

"I don't know, barge building maybe?"

Charlie snorted and threw up his hands:

"Damn, Jack, you always gotta do these things. First it was karate, then computer programming, now you're trying to get me into boat building. Whatever, aren't we trying to start a band here?"

Jack looked at Charlie:

"You want to keep it non-materialistic?"

Charlie looked at Jack:

"I can think of worse things to do."

"You should," Jack said.

He gave Charlie a playful punch on the arm.

Charlie slapped his hand away.

"You got that right, punk."

The following week, Jack and Charlie began to practice in earnest. They knocked on Charlie's landlord's door every morning before work and after work, and when they weren't practicing, they were debating and brainstorming names for their band, favorites included: The Salty Sons, The Spit Swingers, and,—The Lasers and the Bangers.

All names, however, had to be approved by Charlie's landlord, and all were vetoed except for: The Jaundice Boned Bugs, The Smelly Runny Kids, and,—The Nitratory Pool of Knowledge."

After two weeks of practice, the two of them decided to join a jam session on Thursday night.

They had finished the rehearsal and were standing by the door of Charlie's apartment, waiting to go down the hall to the recreational building to hear the other musicians, when Charlie came out and waved them in.

"Hey guys," he said, "it's jam night, we have eight different bands tonight, it should be a lot of fun. There's probably gonna be a whole lot of drinking, and I don't think I want my landlord to hear me talk that way to the other bands... too bad."

Jack shrugged:

"Charlie, you're renting the place, have a few drinks and let the other guys get pretty sloppy, that way, the landlord won't think you're an alcoholic."

"Thanks, Jack, I appreciate the help."

The eight bands took the stage in the large recreation room of the building and began to play. They all sounded horrible, as they were mostly high school age kids who had never played together before.

Soon, however, the dismal sound of the first band gave way to the even worse sound of the second band.

The last band, the band that was supposed to start next,—began to play, and Jack Charlie, and Chet,—a skinhead from the distant South Pacific island of Savai'i,—all cheered.

Jack whistled in appreciation and Charlie threw his head back and began to sing loudly.

Soon, the rest of the players joined in, and the three of them danced and played like they'd been playing together for years.

After the last note had died away in the hall, Chet looked over at Jack and grinned:

"Did you hear that? That was like listening to old bluegrass. Can you believe it?"

Jack nodded:

"This place is really cool."

"Yeah, but, where's your band?" Charlie said.

"We have to play this band sometime."

"We do have a name for our band, Charlie: 'The Toadstool,' What do you think?"

Charlie laughed:

"Yeah. The Toadstool. That's pretty funny."

"Thanks, Charlie," Jack said.

"That's a great name."

"What about: 'The Jaundice Boned Bugs?' "

"Nah, 'Jaundice Boned Bugs' is already taken."

"The Spit Swingers?"

"No."

"The Smelly Runny Kids?"

"Nope, you don't wanna be in a band that has the name 'Smelly Runny Kids,' do ya?" Jack laughed.

"I don't have a problem with the name, I just don't want to be in a band that's in a band that has that name."

"Huh?" Charlie said, confused.

"It's from a novel by Dashiell Hammett, he was a writer during the great depression."

"What did he mean?" Charlie said.

"Well, he wrote the novel in 1933. The protagonist of the story had to take up smoking cigars just to stop the stench of

cigar smoke from following him around. One day, he joined a jazz band, and before they played a single note,—they were known as: 'The Grungy Scumbag Jazz Band.' The band was immortalized forever."

"That's pretty clever, Jack."

"I guess, anyway, let's start a new band."

"Good idea, what should we call it?"

"We can call it: 'The Skid Marks.' "

"Seems a bit pasé."

"It's old, but that's just how it is, well, if you don't like the name 'The Skid Marks,' you can always name your own band, Charlie."

Charlie thought about it for a minute, then took out a crumpled piece of paper from his back pocket and wrote, "The Caulder Midgets."

"How does that one sound, Jack?"

"Works for me, let's start a band."

Jack & Charlie go to Greece. Cap. XII.

During their stay in Greece, Jack and Charlie encountered Parmenides himself, when they were traveling through a forest near Parmentier's cottage. They were surprised to find him there, quite naked.

"Don't worry, dear boy, I'm not a pervert," he said.

Parmenides asked why Jack and Charlie were in the forest, and if they knew of his library. Jack said they were chasing a bear that had stolen their picnic.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaargh!" Parmenides shouted. He pointed at the bear and explained the nature of reality.

"I thought that was obvious," Charlie said.

The three set off for the cottage, but Parmenides kept pace with them, saying he was following them to the cottage to prevent the bears from escaping.

"Why don't you just give us the picnic and get out of the way," Jack asked, hoping he would just hand it over.

Parmenides responded: "Nope, I haven't even read it. Can't have a book without a cover."

Jack and Charlie paused at a deserted farm. Parmenides approached and confronted them. He said that they were not following his advice, and causing the bears to run. Instead of surrendering the picnic, he offered them the sandwiches and ate one of the sandwiches himself.

Jack and Charlie ran from the farm in the opposite direction of Parmenides. Parmenides chased after them.

"Well, so much for my theory," Charlie said.

Jack laughed: "Look at you, always following the bears! You must have read Aristotle too."

A moment later, they heard the sound of the blacksmith shop and knew they were close to Parmentier's cottage.

The three ran into Parmentier's cottage, where the old man and his wife were building a fire in the fireplace.

"Is the bear here?" Charlie asked.

"No, he got away, this isn't the first time he's done this." Parmentier said to the two Englishmen, "I need some more axes to drive my nails," he added.

As Parmentier hammered and chiseled away at the fireplace, Parmenides entered and said:

"Don't bother him, dear lady, he won't harm you."

"I'm trying to get rid of these bears," Parmentier said.

"In all of Greece, no one has ever found any evidence of a bear, or a woodpecker, or the peregrine falcon, but these same people know all about the gods and goddesses. I thought you three would have found some evidence by now,—but you haven't."

"How do you know?" Charlie asked, "aren't they Greek?"

"Nope, they're from the second century A.D. they were really big in the second century. I remember they wanted to name the first moon, 'Persephone's Moon.' They wanted to name this moon after Athena, 'Amaltheia's Moon.' And the young moon, 'Killer Moon,'—well, that's never been proven."

"What about the god Poseidon?" Charlie asked.

"That's in the eighth century," Parmentier anwsered.

"They claim he was the first to bring the columns and the parapet. A pity you weren't around in the eighth century,—you might have been able to win over the general."

"Maybe we shouldn't look for the bear so hard," Jack said, "it may not be there anymore."

Parmenides shook his head and said: "No, we'll still look for the Chinese bear. His name is Tiger."

"If we let one get away, he might come back."

"You can't search for the gods in the woods," Parmentier said, "these woods are filled with bears."

"We've got bears in Greece," Parmenides pointed out.

"I've got to look for Tiger, the Chinese bear."

"Hey, you're talking to a Greek. He's the guy that brought you three here. You're not my business."

Parmenides marched into the house and stood right at the large window.

He held the crowbar in his hand and asked:

"I'm going to break the glass, and if I hit the point of the wood, I'll hear a lot of noise, but, if I can't hear any noise, the glass is not broken."

Charlie wondered:

"If the point of the crowbar is not the point of the wood, and if you don't hear any noise, how will you know the point of the crowbar is not the point of the wood, and if you don't hear any noise, how will you know if it is broken?"

Parmenides slammed his crowbar down on the window and watched. He listened to the wood scratching and moaning as he tried to break through the window.

Charlie looked at Jack and said:

"It sounds like he's getting closer."

In the distance, Charlie could hear the bears crashing around.

Parmenides listened for a moment, but the scraping continued, so he knocked on the window with the crowbar.

"Listen!" Parmenides cried, "come and break the glass. I

can't hear a thing! If you hear the noise, it's not broken. If you don't hear the noise, it's broken. There is no sound, no doubt."

Jack looked at Charlie and said:

"I think the window broke."

Parmenides stood by the window and said:

"I'm going to smash the glass with the stone. If I smash the stone, I'll hear a lot of noise, because the stone will break the glass. Then I'll use the crowbar to bust the hole bigger. When the glass is smashed, I'll bust the stone through the hole, that's what I'll do. If the crowbar breaks the glass, then I'll-"

"Shut up!" Cried Charlie, "that's exactly what I think you're going to do. You're going to smash the glass, you've been talking about how to do it for the past hour."

Parmenides looked at Charlie and asked:

"You think I'm stupid, don't you?"

"Not at all," Charlie said, "you're just a smart guy who's willing to do the hard part."

"I'm smart," answered Parmenides, "what I say must be true. What I say is that I will smash the stone and I will hear a lot of noise. It will not be true."

"That's ridiculous," Charlie laughed, "you will just sit there and watch if you listen to yourself. It doesn't matter that you're not supposed to smash the glass; you're going to do it anyway. Now, why don't you get some ice from the freezer and start smashing it with that hammer? It's hard to hear a bear going about his business. If you don't start a fire and throw it on the roof, then the bears will come back. That's when we'll have to do the job... we're on their trail."

Charlie grinned: "You're acting as the protector of this house. You'll be the prick who stays here and scares the bears away. Or the guy who goes and brings the bear back. Either way, you're probably going to kill one of them."

Parmenides shuddered.

He looked at the bear. It lay still on the ground. He told Charlie to get him some ice from the freezer and set the bear on it. He backed into the room, and then turned toward the door.

He had never seen the bear before. For a moment, he didn't know which bear it was, then he looked at the big black bear and he realized it was a bear.

He asked Jack: "Is that a bear?"

Jack smiled. He took the ice from Charlie's hand and threw it into the woods.

"Yeah," he said, "that's a bear."

Parmenides opened the front door.

"What do you think you're doing?" Jack yelled.

Parmenides walked out the door and Tiger raced around the corner of the house and into the woods.

Jack & Charlie go to the Americas. Cap. XIII.

AT last, Jack and Charlie arrived in the beautiful Aztec-Floridian city of New Tulum, on a golf cart in the afternoon of Tuesday, February twenty-eighth. They had arrived from England by way of Holland, where the two had stayed on the boat for three months and had been subjected to numerous doses of mercury for the treatment of epilepsy.

They were looking forward to the little trip that they had made to Florida, but they had a crash-landed in a golf course and hijacked a cart to get to New Tulum. The two were decidedly disheveled, they had stumbled through their journey, and were now, exhausted, dirty, and dehydrated.

Jack looked to be in his seventies, he had terrible feet and nearly lopsided ankles. His jeans were literally covered in dirt, his coat was old and dirty, his sunglasses were falling off. His hair was unkempt and his hat was more than a little tattered. He had no shoes and no belt to keep his pants up, which hung on his chest like an abandoned sack.

Charlie had on khaki shorts, an old T-shirt, and a pumice stone in his hand. The hems of his shirt were rolled up, and he had a pair of flip-flops on.

The two Englishmen were grateful to be alive and to be seeing some clear water.

When they reached the town square everyone backed away,

slaves looked at them with questions in their eyes. The crowd alternately backed away and closed in on them, fear and curiosity seeming to be the only emotions present. They were at a complete loss for what to do next.

"Is there anywhere we can take a bath?" Jack asked

"Ahh..." Said a tanned woman with high cheekbones.

She had a twangy accent and a warm tone to her voice.

"There's a little house right there," she pointed to a large manor, "that right there is the house of myself and my dear husband."

Jack and Charlie let their gazes fix upon her. She looked to be in her twenties, and she had a full bosom, the upper curves of which were dusted with freckles. She wore the clothes of a proper Seminole southern belle,—a yellow sundress and a straw hat with a pink ribbon. She had a rather revealing neckline. She tugged at the arm of her husband, a jovial looking man who was clearly of Hopi and Zapotec descent, who was arrayed in proper southern gentlemanly garb, consisting of a white long-sleeved collared shirt, brown pants. He looked on indulgently as his wife led the two into the dining hall, where everyone else sat at a long dining table.

Jack and Charlie were given the chance to shower, and a wide selection of Aztec Southerner clothes. Charlie decided to wear a silk blue shirt, a pair of shiny striped blue pants, and a cap, whilst Jack chose a pair of dark, pressed jeans, a white shirt, a tie, and a button down jacket.

They both had the cuffs rolled, their pants lined, and their shoes polished, they then made their way to the dining room. Their hosts were waiting for them eagerly and, upon their arrival, the husband introduced himself:

"My name is Aco-Iskoyo Yeyi," he said, embracing them, "and this is my wife, Xochiquetzal."

He wore a black vest and a pair of dark-rimmed glasses. His hair was trimmed short and thick, and it was shaved along the sides, as was the style in Florida at the time.

"We're very pleased to have you at Shadow's Fall," he contin-

ued, "we hope that, by showing you around, and giving you a tour, you'll enjoy your stay."

"Please," said Aco-Iskoyo, in his signature Florida drawl, "let us have you sit, have yourself a nice comfy seat... You're from... well, where are you from precisely?"

Jack smiled:

"We're English, actually."

Xochiquetzal clapped her hands in delight: "Oh! Oh my heavens! A pair of Englishmen! We have all kinds of English folk visit us here, but I have never seen so much as a mustache to this day! Oh, this is wonderful! You can tell me all your English customs and so on!"

Jack was rather pleased at the compliment, few appreciated his beard. Charlie, for his part, tugged at an imaginary goatee.

Suddenly, a tall, thin black slave approached with a platter of food. She placed it before the couple, and then bowed to Aco-Iskoyo, who beamed:

"Thank you, Mrs. Debambe," he waved her away, and she shuffled into another room.

"Say," Charlie said, returning his gaze away from the door, "why do you talk to your slaves so politely?"

"Why it's simple," Aco-Iskoyo said, "my father used to tell me: 'If I don't treat my slaves like kings, the Great Serpent will devour me,' " he cackled. His wife, for her part, giggled.

"Great serpent?" Jack inquired.

"Also known as Queztique, the snake," Xochiquetzal said, "who, upon death, devours the soul of the person he has owned. You must treat your slaves well, they are much like your own children"

"Great," Charlie said, "I wish I had a slave..."

Aco-Iskoyo chuckled:

"We don't allow ourselves to be governed by slaves, you understand... it's a bad thing... very bad."

Xochiquetzal reached out a hand and took Charlie's:

"We, who are the Pure People of the Red Andros, believe that the world was once filled with red and black people, but

then white, yellow, and brown men mixed with them, causing evil spirits to contaminate the pure blood of the old people. Then, in the desire for revenge, the good spirits released all their vengeance and evil into the world. They sent several demons down to Earth to work their hateful magic. The demons gave the people horrible diseases, and killed, enslaved, and robbed them. The demon spirits were led by an evil queen, who hid in the Spirit World in a castle of ivory and fire, where she wreaked havoc on mankind. She was called Yrezajohka, and she rotted her victims slowly by turning them into cocoons of boils. It took several generations for those years to pass. After that, the white, black, red, brown and yellow people became the gray ones.... That is where we are today, a few pure-blooded Reds still exist on Earth."

"Well that's got me wondering," said Charlie, unwittingly half-adopting his host's accent, "why do you dress in this particular fashion? It's clearly not traditional Aztec, it's... well... white. If it is not a representation of the color of your soul, then what is it?"

There was a silence that stopped just short of being uncomfortable.

"You are right," Aco-Iskoyo said, "it's not traditional Aztec."

Xochiquetzal smiled sweetly: "We dress like this because of a trade union that was established with the European Kingdom-Republic of Ireland long ago, and due to a long series of unfortunate coincidences, we decided to capitalize on the weak economics of the English."

Charlie's eyebrows shot up. He had heard of the Kingdom-Republic of Ireland, it was small, but quite wealthy. It was also apparently near England.

"Now, we are not great fans of the King of England," said Xochiquetzal, "however, we discovered that his kingdom was making billions upon billions exporting slavery, so we figured we could purchase a few white slaves. Speaking of which, would either of you be interested in being slaves?"

Charlie thought about it, but Jack was entirely uninterested.

"Well, what are the benefits?" Charlie inquired.

"You can't be serious," sputtered Jack.

"I am," Aco-Iskoyo smiled, "the question is: Are you interested?"

Charlie paused: "Well, what are the benefits?" he said, arching an eyebrow, "the only reason I wouldn't be interested is if there were no benefits," he added.

Aco-Iskoyo smiled:

"Excellent! The benefits are, of course, incredible!"

"What are the benefits?" Charlie asked.

"For one thing," said Xochiquetzal, "you will always have food, shelter, clothing, medical care, and entertainment. You will be in the highest percentile of American citizens, as well as the highest percentile of Euro-Americans in the nation of Aztlan."

"And what are the drawbacks?" Charlie added.

Aco-Iskoyo said:

"You must stay in Aztlan for the rest of your life."

Jack hastened to add:

"And no life insurance policy is worth a black fly's balls."

Charlie's eyebrows furrowed:

"What do you mean by that?"

Jack sighed, waving his hand:

"Please, Charlie... I'm sorry, it's just-"

"I understand," said Charlie, nodding, "okay, so what are the main disadvantages?"

"Well," said Aco-Iskoyo, "the life insurance itself is rather limited, I mean, it's perfectly fine, but fairly limited when it comes to diseases."

Charlie blanched:

"What do you mean? How am I supposed to get a dog and a girlfriend, if I can't get covered for cancer?"

Before anyone could say anything else, a series of rapid knocks resounded from the door.

A slave opened up the door, two soldiers, one a negro, the other Filipino, stood outside. They wore the signature arraignments of the Aztec high guard: All black armor with a red trim.

"Hello, sirs," said the negro soldier, addressing Jack and Charlie, "you are to come with us."

"May we ask why?" Said Charlie.

"The Emperor, he who is arrayed in sunlight and splendor, wishes to see you," replied the Filipino, "now if you'll come with us..."

There was no point in arguing, so Jack and Charlie grabbed their packs and followed the soldiers out. Aco-Iskoyo provided them with food and books for their journey,—a parting gift. He wept bitterly, as he was deprived of two fascinating guests. He cried out: "Wait! You can't take them! They might've given me the gift of the white!.."

The two were loaded onto a helicopter which was decorated with green ribbons. It rose into the air, turning south towards Tenochlitan.

"Where are we going?" Asked Charlie.

"Tenochlitan, it will only take a few to get there," said the Filipino, "but we must fly as low as possible."

The pair sat huddled together, listening to the thunderous engine, and watched the city fade into the night. It was a cold, empty, bleak, city—they would not miss it.

The helicopter landed and they were led to a large truck that was waiting outside, and were told to get inside.

Charlie turned to Jack: "Say, do you think they call it 'Mexico' because they seem so mixed?"

Jack chuckled: "Or maybe that's why they call 'em Mixtecs."

Charlie laughed: "In any case, I hope we can meet Aco-Iskoyo and his wife again, they seem so nice!"

Jack nodded: "Me too, Charlie."

Charlie gazed out the rear-view window:

"Someday, when this is all over, we're going to have to look each other in the eye."

Jack chuckled: "But what is an eye? Nothing but a window to the soul. Maybe it should be called a spy-hole, a peephole."

Charlie didn't laugh.

The negro soldier looked at them curiously. He spoke in a thick Iberian accent: "Mundokus, if you please, demixtus!"

They were lead onto another helicopter, it took flight and made a sharp turn, heading due East.

After a few dozen minutes, it landed. Jack and Charlie were taken to a truck, a large unassuming one, made from carbon fiber.

There was no door, instead, there were two large plexiglass doors that hung open on either side of the truck.

At the wheel was a man of Middle Eastern extraction, the lips of his mouth were turned down in distaste, his eyebrows were set in a frown. The black of his armor was punctuated by a green camouflage pattern, and his weapons were a mixture of bow, blunderbuss, and lance.

He stepped out of the truck.

The negro soldier spoke:

"Pardon, hijo, but I no tienen ninguna habitaciones. Son de guerra, y pendejadas."

"Say," Charlie wondered aloud, "why do so many of you speak Spanish?"

The negro turned to him:

"One of the first countries that fell to the Triple Alliance was Spain, and so many conquered subjects and slaves spoke the language that it only made sense to unofficially adopt it."

Jack and Charlie were escorted to the vehicle. The ride was very bumpy, reminiscent of an earlier journey.

"Permit me to introduce myself," the man finally spoke, in a heavy Arabic accent, "I am Yuya, my nickname is Tasraaiz."

"How did you arrive in the great Aztec empire?"

"My family has been here for generations. Some of my ancestors were Water-Gypsies, as we call ourselves, from the deep Caucasus mountains."

This greatly disturbed Jack and Charlie, who only heard of water gypsies from The Book of Shaath, an ancient Hittite text of which they had both read. They looked at each other uneasily.

"I am an omen of sadness," Tasraaiz said, "my grandfather was a man of great honor, he chose to enter the Aztec empire,

despite his family, because he loved the majesty and charm of their culture. The Aztecs worshiped the moon for its power over the weather, they walked beneath its light, and did not fear it."

Yuya stopped the truc, and started it again after a few minutes. It started with an electrical chirp and a hum. He shifted into gear, and began to drive. He mechanically switched on the AUX on the truck, the song "Cupid Stole My Guillotine" by "D-unique" started to play, it was the "Basement Remix" of the much-maligned mash-up dance hit, "The Guillotine."

The song reminded Jack of something, he wanted to ask, but he didn't want to startle Tasraaiz.

They eventually arrived at the palace. The pair were again given a new set of clothes, according to their particular traits, physical and spiritual. Jack was dressed in fine slacks, a pleated collar shirt, and a tuxedo jacket. Charlie was dressed in a blazer, dark trousers, and a vest.

Tasraaiz drove off, having fulfilled his duty.

Jack and Charlie were led into the throne room, they could not help but be awed by the site. The room itself was, unlike other rooms in the palace, purely Aztec; an abstract pattern of rock spiraling around the entire room.

In the center, a throne, a circular jaguar head made of black stone adorned it. The legs were feathered, the throne itself was made out of large gilded plates.

An Aztec priest stood on either side of the throne.

"Approach His Eminence, The Haughty Occasioner of Heaven," said a guard, loftily.

Jack and Charlie knelt, their gaze fixed upon the man who summoned them. The lord of the Triple Alliance, Emperor of the Aztec: Quetzalocoatlus Rex.

"Englishmen," he mused, "Englishmen, one frail, one large. State your names..."

"We are Jack Whiting," said Jack, a bit timid, "I am of partial Persian descent."

"I am Charles Limus, wealthy, unscrupulous industrialist."

"I am Jack Whiting, renowned author of literature that was mostly stolen."

"I am Charles Limus, of the Limus clan, respected by all, but occasionally feared."

Quetzalcoatlus waved his hand:

"You may both stand," he said.

They did.

"I feel this is all a bit surreal," said Jack.

"Indeed, the fairy tale is just beginning, as it were," Quetzalcoatlus proclaimed, "you will each be sacrificed tomorrow. This is a very specific lunar phase. You will drink a libation, an alcoholic drink which is particularly common in my realm. You will each be possessed by a power that neither of you understand. You will be bound to an item that will alter your personalities."

"Like I said, surreal," said Jack.

"You will be mine. You will do as I command."

Charlie thought about it:

"What's in it for us?" He asked.

Quetzalcoatlus didn't answer, he waved for the guards to take them away, and he put them in a rather lavish jail cell. It was adorned with a variety of pillows, and there were several decorations of stone and psilocybin mushrooms. The two men stared at each other.

"I hate this place," Charlie said.

"Already? Both of us, imprisoned in the same cell... How long until we're catatonic, sir?"

"To be my servant, to serve my will, forever," Quetzalcoatlus had said to them, "you will remain here in this cell for the tomorrow, and we shall be observing your thoughts, your deeds, your goals. You will be constantly monitored, and soon, you will begin to understand what it is I want. It is a terrifying experience."

"I'll be honest Jack," Charlie said, sipping on some pulque, "I don't particularly mind dying, I don't even mind being sacrificed, I just... I don't know, I'd like just a bit more information!"

Jack shrugged:

"Well, remember what good old king Quetzalcoatlus told us: 'In our culture, in the religion of my realm, the souls of the dead are brought back to the world of the living, if they've been good, or lost souls are returned to the cycle of rebirth. Your souls may return to the realms of the dead, that you may gain the wisdom, the memories, the intelligence, the knowledge and understanding that they were denied, and whether you die an unheroic death, will be in the hands of our illustrious religion, and it will be part of the great cycle of the cycle of the cycle of rebirth.' "

Charlie mulled that over, contemplatively, and then he looked over at Jack, who was in the corner, staring at the walls, studying the paintings.

"I don't think we want to be part of that cycle, for sure."

Jack shook his head absently: "Look at this painting."

Charlie did so, it was an odd painting, made in the style of an archaic Teotihuacan mural. Several semi-naked people were sacrificed in an amphitheater.

Charlie thought this was absolutely ridiculous. It depicted a sort of a cross between the Big Dipper and the Andromeda galaxy, with circles around a pyramid-like structure on the celestial sphere, and there were perhaps a hundred stars in some kind of geometric, mostly circular, design.

"What do you reckon it's depicting?" Queried Charlie.

Jack shrugged: "I dunno, some sort of 'goodbye universe, I don't like you' love story?"

"Jeez," Charlie shook his head, "come on, this is really embarrassing, isn't it?"

"This was our last day as free men," Jack said, "perhaps we should have taken Mr. Iskoyo's offer. Hell, we could have gotten stitched up, maybe, and returned to England. We could have fought the end of the world with a bunch of eccentric druids and hippies... who knows? What do we know?"

Charlie shrugged:

"I'm willing to wait this out,—to see what it is we were supposed to do. What was Quetzalcoatlus talking about?"

"Or, maybe we're meant to be in this place, as it is, until we die... As it is, as it is, as it is..."

Charlie finished his pulque and went to his bed. He sat down, listening to the wind in the palm trees outside, wishing that he was back in London, back with his lovely wife.

Chuckling quietly to himself as he drank a warm glass of the ale, Jack leaned back in his chair and took a leisurely sip of the liquid. He had chosen to wait, rather than sleep, until their destiny was decided, and it was a tough choice, but he felt strongly that when the time was right, it would be right. It was odd how things worked out sometimes.

"You know," Jack said, looking up from his glass, "I don't think I've ever known what exactly the meaning of life is. I've known this kind of vague, abstract idea, but never really knew the real thing at all. I can't even make myself believe that there was a purpose, a point, or that there is something beyond death. All I've ever known is death, the total of death, and that's just not enough."

Charlie eyed him: "What's the plan, then?"

"The plan?"

"The plan of escape," Charlie added.

"You've got it," Jack said, "I think... Man, the world is too small, isn't it? And too complicated, really, the rules of human survival, the quirks and patterns of human interaction,—there's just too much to get it. Think about the Aztec, they are so much more complex and powerful than the Romans ever were. Their art, their music, their medicine, it's just astounding, we just can't compete. We're just simple primitive creatures that have to scramble for our food, and our shelter, and everything else. Look, my gramps, he's gonna be a hundred and ten in the next few months, and my mum, she's ninety, she lives in a house that she and gramps built together. They've had every birthday party for the last decade, because they can afford to do it, because they're still mobile, because they've got nothing but time. We're just lucky that we've had somewhere to go every day since we were born, we've still got some of our human-

ity left, if we have it to be honest. How long before the corpses start piling up?"

Charlie considered that, then spoke:

"I just feel like, for a lot of people, death is really a solution. It's always there, like a solution. We just think that if we live as long as we can, then we've got the chance to have a normal life, and then, one day, when we're nothing more than a face on a television, and in the nursing home, or the hospital,—there's nothing left."

Jack took a sharp breath: "You're right. It would be better to die proudly as sacrificial lambs."

As the sun began to set on the temple grounds, Jack and Charlie sat quietly, their hearts racing with anticipation. They knew that they were mere sacrificial lambs to the mighty gods of the Aztec people, but they were ready to embrace their fate with honor and dignity. And, as they waited for death to come upon them, they could not help but marvel at the sheer beauty and complexity of this ancient civilization, so powerful and all-consuming in its grip on humanity.

Charlie whispered: "Do you think we would have had the same adventures if we were Aztecs?"

Jack was silent for a moment: "I wonder what it would be like to live in this world in a different age."

"Me too," Charlie agreed.

The sun sank slowly into the western sky, and the light danced across the altar stones, casting shadows through the temple halls, and illuminating the faces of the two men.

Jack glanced at Charlie, who was watching the sun sink.

"Are you nervous?" Jack asked.

Charlie smiled wanly: "Yes, I am."

"Me too," admitted Jack.

"But it will be alright." Charlie said.

"I hope so."

The sun finally set, and the sky turned black.

The next morning, a single guardsman took them out of their cell. Jack thought it curious that they only sent in one

guardsman,—he figured he and Charlie could even take him, but neither of them made a move to attack or escape, for such was their acceptance of their fate.

After the guard bound them, he walked them to the outskirts of the prison where he cut their bindings.

"My name," he said, "is Ometecuhtli. I am a secret agent working for the United States of Amezecua."

"The US?" Charlie scoffed, "why?"

"Because sacrificing two Englishmen would bolster the Aztecs to new heights of morale, which would embolden them to attack the United States with renewed vigor. They may even grow confident enough to attack our fledgling allies to the south, the Anti-Aztec Andean Alliance. Or, if that doesn't work, perhaps they'll turn on the British Isles themselves, and they may even attack Eastern Europe. Theirs is the most potent army that has ever existed, and they will destroy the world if they are not stopped."

"Wait, you're telling me that you're here to stop us from being sacrificed?"

Ometecuhtli nodded: "Exactly that."

Jack sighed: "So now we're just going to run away? I feel like Charlie and I are at peace now, right, Charlie?"

Charlie shrugged: "I don't know if I'd say that, I mean, I've never wanted to die in my life, but I guess I'd rather die here, in this place, where I can watch the sunset, and listen to the wind in the trees, than in a field of mud or under fire or what have you."

Jack nodded: "I agree."

Ometecuhtli sighed: "I cannot allow you two to die under the Aztecs. There is no reason why I can't kill you myself, however."

He trained his gun at Jack and fired.

The bullet careened through Jack's shoulder.

Charlie tackled Ometecuhtli and, having grabbed a branch, began to ruthlessly beat him with it.

Ometecuhtli slumped to the ground. He'd live, Charlie realized. So would Jack. He inspected Jack's wound. It was mostly superficial.

Jack looked up at the sky:

"I think I'm beginning to understand."

"What do you mean?" Charlie said.

"Well, I'm not sure I do, but I'm beginning to feel that I do. I'm not sure I'll ever be able to put it into words, though."

Charlie didn't reply. He slumped by the tree where Jack lay, regarding Ometecuhtli.

Noticing a pack of cigarettes on the latter's person, he reached out, offering it to Jack, who accepted it.

"Are we alive, Charlie? Are we in the future now? Have we achieved death and peace?"

Charlie shook his head: "It seems so strange," he murmured, "Everything seems so far away, as though we're from some distant land." He sighed, "I'll bet we were close." He coughed, and went silent for a moment.

"I have an idea," Charlie said eventually.

"Go on."

"Well, what I have in mind, if you can stop bleeding for just a moment, is, we both keep exploring this strange continent. We're wanted men now, so I suggest we keep going due South. Maybe we'll see the end of the world there. I'm curious about what this planet will become when it ends."

Charlie stood, looking down on Jack.

"So you'd rather run, then?" Jack said.

Charlie glanced at Jack: "I think that it'd be more of an adventure this way, if I run from everything. We'd make it down to Patagonia. From there we'll go further South. Maybe there will be islands to the South, the islands where the gods roamed the world."

Ometecuhtli had awoken. He picked himself off the ground and spoke in a raspy voice:

"You are alive," he observed and laughed a strange, mad laugh, "well, then, follow me. Get in the car, I'll drive you South into the Andes."

Jack and Charlie looked at each other. They had no better options. Did the sun stop rising? Perhaps for a moment, a fem-

tosecond. Perhaps forever. Perhaps there's no day. There was a world and a civilization, and an eon called the 'Mesoamerican,' and the sky was always red.

Jack & Charlie Recount Murdering Each Other's Fathers. Cap. XIV.

AS he put out his last cigar for the day, Jack spoke:

"Hey Charlie, I've a question."

"Go on, Jack."

"Can you tell me again," said Jack, "how and why you killed my father, again?"

"Only if you remind me why you killed mine."

"You first, Charlie."

"Very well, Jack. He was always in the merchant's court, of course, right up in the court of state, with an especial pleasure in drinking himself into a stupor in the beer-house or wine-house, and then sozzling himself out in the saloon, which is the court of pleasure. He was fond of telling me that all statesmen in Europe were equally in love with pleasure and enjoyment; but I told him, of course, that pleasure and enjoyment are for the public good, that we need them not to treat, insult, or kill ourselves, but to make the lives of others happy and agreeable. He, of course, did not believe me, but he became annoyed when I called him on it; he cursed me with a wicked oath, and said: 'There is no pleasure in the public-life, my friend, for aught we know.' Then I said: 'Let me say to you, O! quaffing philistine, that pleasure and enjoyment are of the greatest utility to men, and they are not to be renounced, because some heretics and sinners have said so. For we have seen that a long time ago, and we have heard that every state of pleasure has been in the history of mankind. But if a person exists, and he does not want pleasure and enjoyment, and is content to live, and live at no more than his labor can give him,—he is *cursed*, and cursed without end. And if any enemy of pleasure and enjoyment does exist, a misfortune will attach to him until his end. But if I give

to myself pleasure and enjoyments without any dishonor and without any evil, then I will be a man of a different kind, whom you shall call *righteous*. I will be pious, because piety is a virtue. I will be virtuous, because virtue is a virtue.' Anyway, he got very upset at this Epicurean notion, and he said: 'You are very much mistaken, Charlie. It is I who knows so much of the whole morality of the world, and I am greatly versed in learning the virtues and vices. And if you do not believe what I tell you, then go and kill yourself, for I have not time to argue with you. And after you have killed yourself, take care to avoid the other death, for I do not know if there is a place for you there.' Then he got up on his feet, and sat himself down to one side of the table with a gesture of contempt, and said: 'Go on, Charlie.' But I did not move for fear he might call me back and accuse me of hypocrisy. So I sat down by the table and took out my pipe, and lit it up, and sat down again and took out my works and read them, and pretended to read them, and so we got along with not having to talk. And when I had got quite well into my books, he grabbed one, and said: 'This is: *The Anatomy of a Lunatic*, Charlie.' It turned out that he knew that much, so I took the book from him and began to read it, and so he got quite angry again. He cursed me again. He was very upset that you were associating with me, Jack, because I told him that you believed in these virtues. He began to tear up my books, and thereupon I grabbed a knife and stabbed him in the back, and so I told him: 'If you don't stop tearing up my books, I will stab you all over again.' And then he began to curse me again, and continued to tear at my books. I got very angry at him again, and I slapped him over the face, and then I felled him with a blow of my knuckle upon his throat. Before he died, as he struggled to breathe, he managed to say: 'Help me Jack! Help me! Help me!' I laughed and then I grabbed a poker and impaled him, and I mocked his cries. I made him scream and I cursed him and I told him: 'You will give your last prayers to me. You will give them to me now.' And then I killed him with the poker, and as he lay down on the floor, his blood ran down

his head to his breaſt, and I said: 'Fuck you, man. Fuck you. You cursed me... You cursed me.' I kicked the corpse on the floor and I went away laughing. And I remember you burſt into the room to find him dead; you seemed a tad displeased with me after that."

Jack nodded: "It wasn't the beſt night. Juſt before then, right across the ſtreet, by the docks, your father and myself were fiſhing, and he began to talk about a box of matches. He said: 'There is such a box of matches in the docks.' So, I took my lamp and went down by the docks to look for such a box of matches. But I could not find such a box of matches; but, then, I saw he found one. It was a fine box, hailing, I think, from the diſtant land of Chile. The box was nicely wrapped up in red cotton; and I took it, and went back to the house and put it away. That was a nice box of matches. And afterwards, I used it myself. To do so, I drowned your father, because he did not want to give me the box of matches, even when I tried to talk him into it."

"You really like boxes for some reason, Jack, why?"

"Because they are very nice boxes to see through. In faƈt, I love boxes for the same reason you love tents, the *possibilities* of opening them. and using them for different purposes. are quite marvelous. A tent is a great comfort to you, it gives you a sense of shelter, and a feeling of safety and security. A box is juſt like that, but it's for *my* things."

Charlie huffed:

"I think tents are better than boxes, though. Tents are comforting, boxes are not."

"That's a very prejudiced thing to say, Charlie."

"Maybe it is. Do you remember what happened when we both found out we killed each other's fathers?"

Jack nodded: "I thought you deserved to die, but not for a long time, and certainly not for a bit of a revenge ſtory. Revenge ſtories are a bit irritating, and they are a bit childiſh."

Charlie grunted: "For my part, I felt it was very good. I don't know if I would have killed you then, or ever, and neither do you. But the faƈt that I had killed your father meant that we

were even, not that I much care about that. But then I was able to walk away and go about my business; and I took over his business to do so. And that business was fishing, so I started to fish as well."

"It's very primitive and humble, but it's a good thing, Charlie. All the more reason to make use of tents, because they are all you have, and all you really need to have."

"Is that what you think, Jack? That a tent is a more useful place to live than a house?"

"I don't know. That's something I would have to decide for myself."

"And would you decide to live in a tent, just like that?"

"Of course not, Charlie. I like tents, but I am not as fond of tents as you are. All tents are made in one way, that is, in one place. In a house, all the walls are made from many different pieces; but in a tent, there is only one piece of whatever material the tent is made from."

With that, the two friends had reached the bottom of the beach. Charlie walked to a narrow, low cliff, that overlooked the beach. And as Charlie walked to the top of the cliff, and looked at the tents and the red-hot sand, Jack watched, fascinated, but a little more wary.

Charlie turned to his friend:

"When I see those tents, Jack, I see the open spaces of my past, I see the tents of Ishmael and the tents of the Arabs, and I think to myself: I may not have an open space now, but I am grateful for the ones I have, and am glad for the memories of my childhood that my tent offers. So the tents remind me of those memories, and that I have good memories, and I think the tents of those I know may not be very impressive, but they are certainly not bad either."

Jack nodded.

They stood upon the cliff, surveying the horizon as it disappeared behind the forest to their left, and the landscape of their country beyond, and beyond that to the rolling blue mountains and to the blue seas.

Jack & Charlie Destroy London. Cap. XV.

THE wagon, rattling along, was conducted by the sound of its metal wheels against the flint-like surface of the track and this made it impossible to tell where they were, for the compartment had been dismantled before the resumption of the construction work. And all that remained was a narrow crossing that led directly to the old station, a sagging roundhouse, half-built and, what was more, no longer a building at all, for the old station, which had long been abandoned, had long since been consumed and demolished by a rumored huge fire, and so when the train drew up and passed over the level crossing, which the rails and the trestles and the mud-covered rails and the clattering wheels had all long ago become indistinguishable from one another. The magnificent dilapidated structure of the old station building appeared no longer but a faded, disembodied, image on a smoky bank of smoke, and as they approached, it began to slowly fade away until finally it was gone.

Jack and Charlie alighted from the wagon and, after some time of waiting for people to appear, and seeing nobody, set off for the hall of the old station, which consisted of a few storerooms, some toilets and the gatehouse, the latter of which they climbed through to reach the upper story, through an unlocked door and up to the roof. Up there, they went onto the crow's nest, a wooden skeleton with a view that, until very recently, offered a glorious panorama. And there they stood, looking down upon the city, even though, for all their efforts, they had never managed to truly escape from it.

"Doesn't that seem a little pathetic," asked Jack, turning to Charlie, "I mean, you know, traveling all the way back from Tuva, just for a view of a dead old station that's still standing because the level crossing's been locked," Jack paused for a moment, "I mean, how strange. I just don't get it," he added, in a tone of great disenchantment. "Why do people travel such a long way? To go to a view that's been lying there rotting since

the glory days of Victorian England? To sit here and watch the world go by."

"It is," Charlie answered, "quite pathetic."

"Yeah, it's pathetic."

"But it's a good kind of pathetic," Charlie continued, "a victorious kind. Like, see here, when I rape a girl at knife-point in the dark, it's pathetic because I do so, and I've raped her. But if, when the sun comes up, I rape her naked, then that's pure victory, and I know that it means I am great, that I am strong, that I am bigger and stronger than all of the other boys, and that I have conquered, and in conquering I have saved, and I have been liberated. And so, when I'm here, I feel I have conquered the world." He finished, proudly, gazing at the vast city from their vantage point, and as he did so he called down into the city:

"I am larger than the entire world! And more powerful than all of its inhabitants!"

Then he called again, more solemnly:

"I am stronger than the very air that you breathe... and I can do anything I wish."

"Yeah," Jack agreed, somewhat weakly, "and you know what's amazing?"

"What?" Charlie asked.

And, for a moment, Jack was too stunned by his own brilliance to continue.

"That it was entirely unnecessary to return from Tuva, where you'd been perfectly happy, to this place of eternal, hungry boredom," Jack remarked, "you never needed to, in the first place, but that's the beauty of it, and I like that... I like that, for all the rusted trains and ladders and broken glass on the track, it's still fun, and it's interesting, and it's a little bit more than it appears to be, and all that sort of thing."

"Tuva is a haze to me," Charlie said, casting his eyes heavenward, "I am not so caught up in the nothingness and the sterility that you are," he continued, "but you know what, we all go through what we go through. My life could have been pretty easy, but then I decided to travel with you, and then we went

off on that safari to find the Eye of Horus, and now here we are, sitting in front of an absolute pile of rubble that a dragon spent a few decades carving its hoard out of, staring out at an even more incomprehensible maelstrom of... I don't even know what to call it... I don't even care, it's irrelevant."

"London stopped being beautiful when the Romans left."

"Yeah," Charlie replied, "and the Roman empire doesn't even exist anymore. That's probably why everything's so ugly," he shifting his attention back to the motorway below, "and don't get me wrong, I love London, but when you get right down to it, it's just a big heap of limestone."

"Maybe," Jack said, "if you weren't here, that would mean you weren't here."

"What?" Charlie asked, with an agitated sort of inflection in his voice, as if he were trying to make sense of a contradiction that was beyond him.

"Maybe, Charlie," Jack repeated, "if you weren't here, then London wouldn't be London."

"What?" Charlie said, more loudly than before.

"If you weren't here, then it wouldn't be," Jack replied, a little too loudly, "what's London if we aren't in it? If we're not looking at that grand old pile of bricks on the horizon? It's just a pile of rubble. If we're not at that, it would just be a pile of rubble, that's all. It wouldn't be London."

Charlie considered this for a moment:

"What if we could make London a better city? I've studied city planning a bit, I know how the city should be shaped and what parts should be kept, and what should be demolished," he said, "I can do that, I know all about it."

"Aha," Jack replied, making a show of leaning into the conversation, "now you're the real pro, Charlie, you understand the difficulties of this. We're here to simply stand in the way of a cataclysmic catastrophe. We can do that, but it'll have to be in a way that benefits us... it's a little difficult."

"It benefits us because it'll be a better London, and we'll be here to see it happen," Charlie said, "you see, Jack," he added,

getting to his feet, "they say that the eye is the symbol of intuition, but it's also the symbol of adaptability."

"Or," Jack said, as he reached for his gun, "it's the symbol of patience."

"Or," Charlie said, "it's the symbol of insanity."

Charlie's plan involved him and Jack slowing down the steady stream of traffic. The latter's gun began to make a more constant ticking noise, one he was inordinately fond of.

"And one thing that we can do, Jack, is step on this car here. It's not moving. We're going to slow it down, and it will slow the traffic behind it down, and then, as you've seen, the traffic behind it will slow it down even more. We'll be coming in like a hurricane, and then we'll split and travel in our two directions, with one of us shooting at people every now and again. Not a barrage, just occasional shots, it will be slow, and it will make me feel like a knight in shining Armour." He finished, and nodded enthusiastically to himself.

"I see what you mean, Charlie," Jack said, "I like the idea."

"We'll take the car," Charlie said, hopping up and down excitedly, "and get on the motorway above it. It's a minor road, I don't think it'll be very crowded. We'll get to the coast and set fire to it with gunfire, I think, maybe blow it up with a couple of rockets. It'll slow everything else down, and then we'll be at the site. No problem, right?"

"Right," Jack replied.

"The river will help us," Charlie went on, "it'll slow things down and make the task of taking out the bridge easier."

"And," Jack added, "we can stop some of the traffic by shooting at it. But then what? What happens after we destroys half of London's infrastructure?"

"We build London over again."

"What.?" Jack said, looking confused.

"That's right, we'll knock out all the buildings, have London rise up from the sea, and then build it back up again."

"But we destroy so much infrastructure in the process, we'll

need the rest of the world's infrastructure to work. Where will that come from?" Jack asked.

"Here," Charlie said, pulling out a finger and pointing at the houses, the stores, the street lamps, the tarmac, the steel girders, "we'll start again in these houses, and we'll start with the roads. I mean, they're the main arteries of the city. We don't need the rest of London to move, now that we have these roads, do we?"

"Not in the least," Jack replied.

"So we knock out the bridges, the roads, the wires, the sewer system, the air and water systems, the medical system, everything, all of it. London's only use is as a shopping center and a tourist attraction."

"I don't know," Jack said, "I mean, if you destroy everything, what happens to the human race, Charlie? What are the functions of the rest of the world without London?"

"Food and water," Charlie said, with a shrug, "as long as people can get around and eat and drink, they'll still survive."

"Okay, well, that's good," Jack replied, "I guess you're right."

And so, the two of them carried out their plan. Some of the inhabitants of London fled, some were forced out, some were killed, some stayed and survived, and some, in typical Londoner fashion, turned against their neighbors and killed each other off. After some turmoil, and after various political schemes were sorted out,—Jack and Charlie began the reconstruction of the city with the assistance of the local provisional government.

While they rebuilt London, Jack and Charlie decided that there was no need for trains, cars would do just fine. If there were roads, even if it was a dirt road, cars could use it. When they did build a bridge, they built a smaller bridge, this time across the Thames. A few bridges, of more than two lanes still existed, as bridges were obviously necessary for some things, such as those used by freight trains, but for the most part, cities didn't need such bridges. They decided to rename London back to Londinium, as they still used the Roman name of the city, and most of the buildings were made from pre-existing materials, such as timber and stone, with the exception of the few sky-

scrapers, built with reinforced concrete, to provide the needed strength. Within two years, the great city of Londinium was back up and running. Jack and Charlie appointed a Tuvan friend they made, a man called Sühbaatar, as Lord Mayor of the city. When he first arrived, he talked about bettering relations with the Urals and joining the Scythian Confederation, and he wanted to start an Empire to bring the rest of Europe under British rule, but Jack and Charlie didn't really care.

"Say Charlie, why did we do all that again?"

"I'm not quite sure," Charlie replied, "It seemed like a good idea at the time."

"I'm starting to wonder," said Jack, "why did we think it was a good idea?"

"I don't know," Charlie answered, "because it seemed like a good idea at the time?"

"Yeah, yeah, that's the reason."

Jack & Charlie Become Detectives. Cap. XVI.

THe play was interrupted by four of its stalwart attendants, the town youths, who rushed in to find it during the blackest night of the century. They, of course, are long gone, but as the fragments of the play gleam from the boughs of a long-forgotten tree, and the skirl of harpsong fills the clearing, the boys find themselves in a universe of their own making. Their visions are those of the play, performed with somber, earnest tenderness: A kingdom ruled by good king Belshazzar, with his loyal queen Emna, and his three children, Belshazzar II, Elisabeth, and Judas; a slightly spoiled Mordred the Mad, shaking with rage at his captivity, and Magog, the slobbering, headstrong barbarian from the East who stands in the way of this happy society. The play of spheres and ice powers them on, awakening in them a friendship, and they share the role of king, queen, and parents. They even give birth to an infant princess, Seriphia, who, at the end of the play, is left in the care of her very young grandfather, king Brython. And as the sun glows and the trees and flowers open in song, they know

that their suffering has come to an end, that they will find their way home.

Jack and Charlie were walking about after witnessing the play. Jack suffered the indignity of nearly being assaulted by a rough mob. And, as the people began to clear out, they passed the body of a young human boy,—washed to death in the fountain—but took no notice of it.

They went over to a nearby house. Jack gripped a key between his fingers: "We've arrived," he said.

Charlie looked around:

"Yeah, but it's not our house, but we can use it."

Jack grinned slyly at that: "It's not home, but it's a start."

"We don't have to be here forever," Charlie said, "not if we don't want to."

"Oh, of course we want to," Jack responded.

"Hey, I'm gonna grab us some sodas."

"Of course," Jack said, "sure."

Charlie trotted off, a cheer on his lips.

When Charlie returned, he held two bottles of soda.

"Thank you, Jack," he said, pressing a few bucks into his hand, "and no need for any more coins."

"Your sudden willingness to part with the contents of your pocket is quite unexpected," Jack said.

"So is this," Charlie replied, "I feel like I just entered a fantasy movie."

Charlie had found some binoculars. Jack took the binoculars and looked through them. He focused on the roof of an otherwise nondescript office building,—a flashy collection of fountains, constructed out of black concrete, in spite of the bright moonlight outside. Charlie noticed and ran back to his friend, holding out his beer:

"What's that?" Charlie said.

"It's this," Jack said, "right here."

"This?"

"Yeah," Jack said, "this." He indicated a dark alley, "there's some grisly stuff going on here."

"Yeah, I know," Charlie said, as the smell of the beers mixed with the scent of rot in the air.

"Come here and take a look."

The façade of the building was illuminated by the shimmering lights of the office windows. Jack leaned out, peering at the scene below.

"My God," he said, his voice echoing around the street.

"What is it?" Charlie said.

"It's a corpse."

Charlie's eyes widened and he spun around to face Jack:

"What? What's a corpse doing there?"

"It's a boy, he's decapitated."

"What are you," Charlie said, "some sort of morgue detective?"

Jack shook his head:

"No, I'm looking at a boy killed by police. And yes, Charlie, I'm a fucking morgue detective. You've always scoffed at my detective skills, but now you'll get to see them firsthand, lad. So, strap in, and just sit back while you watch my handiwork."

"Jack, if you think you can do this without my skills as a photographer, you're crazy, you're practically holding a weapon."

Jack glanced at Charlie:

"Come along, then," he said, grinning inwardly.

"So, wait, why do you figure it was the coppers what did this?" Asked Charlie.

"There was a big protest in this area yesterday: Cops, anarchists, picketers, every fucking nasty group you can think of came out and scuffled. They were right on this corner."

"And what did these thugs do?"

"They killed the poor boy, obviously. Now we just have to figure out who, and why."

The smell of the beers grew stronger.

"Hold on," said Charlie, as he stretched his arms as far out as he could, lurching forward, dragging his feet as if they were no longer attached to his leg. "I'll get you some witnesses."

Jack raised an eyebrow.

Charlie planted his feet on the ground and bent his knees, ſtiffly thruſting out his hands:

"I'll be right back," he said, "I'm going to find witnesses. Juſt let me go in there and take some shots of the scene."

"Don't be long," said Jack.

He waved and went back to his makeshift lab, where he smashed another bottle againſt the other, plunging their lights back into darkness.

Charlie walked into the dark alleyway, groping around the cobbles with his foot, hoping to find a witness.

A short woman, with a scarf wound around her head, passed by him.

"Hey, what's going on here?" Charlie said.

She ſtopped abruptly, like a ſtatue, frozen.

Charlie lowered his camera:

"Nothing," he said, chuckling nervously. He pointed in the direction of the corpse, "it's the fat one," he said.

The woman cocked her head to one side and then glared at him: "The fat one?"

"He died, did you see what they did to him?"

"It's juſt a body," she said.

Charlie paused, he had to choose his next words carefully:

"I heard you scream when you saw what happened."

The woman appeared confuſed.

"Maybe you didn't see what really happened."

She gave Charlie a look, and for the firſt time, she looked as young as she was supposed to be.

"What are you talking about?"

"I can help you, I'm a morgue detective."

"No!" She exclaimed as she drew a piſtol from her waiſtband and pointed it at him, "I don't know what you're talking about."

"I juſt need you to write a ſtatement," Charlie said.

"I don't want to write a ſtatement. I juſt want to go home."

Charlie dove, tackling her to the ground, knocking the gun out of her hand. The woman ſtruggled, and a coughing sound escaped her throat.

He began to fuck her, forcing her back onto the hard floor, using his knees to force her to the ground, moving her hips with his hands. The woman clawed at the air, but Charlie only tightened his grasp around her neck and fucked her, pumping his dick into her over and over again. He spat at her face, and her eyes rolled back in her head,—unconscious.

He went back to the fountain and collected some water, which he then splashed on her face, and she woke up. He cocked the gun, and pointed it at her head:

"What did you see, woman?"

"What?" She asked, her eyes glazed, looking confused.

"Did you see what they did to the fat one?"

She shook her head slowly:

"No, I don't know what you're talking about."

"Are you absolutely sure?"

"I'm pretty sure," she answered.

"Okay, then, just get the hell out of here," he said, holding the gun tight.

"I'll be out of here in two seconds," she replied.

He picked up her gun and shot her in the face. The woman fell to the ground, groaning, her blood pooling around her. He would have to find another witness.

Then, from the corner of his eye, he spotted a man leaning against a mailbox, struggling to stay awake. He was clean shaven and sporting a goatee, his clothes worn and dirty.

"Hey, man," Charlie said, "you need to get out of here, it's a crime scene."

"You gonna call the cops, prick?"

Charlie shook his head:

"I don't think so, but I do need to talk to you."

"I got nothing to say."

"Look, it's really important."

"Yeah? Okay, ask what you want."

At his side was a woman, about Charlie's age, perhaps a little younger. She had a high school ID card hanging around her

neck. She looked a little nervous, her hands clasped together at her chest.

He took out his notepad and produced a Polaroid of the boy's corpse, which he took earlier.

"Have you seen this boy?"

"That's.... that's Micky," the woman said.

"How do you know him?"

"I grew up with him," she said, "we were in the same foster home... he was one of my best friends."

"Have you seen him recently?"

"I was a kid then," she said, "I don't know, he just disappeared one day, I never saw him again. I don't understand how he looks so young, he looks nearly identical to how he did back then."

The man coughed:

"I heard some screams the other night, accompanied by a gunshot. I went to the window but couldn't make anything out. I tried to call the cops, but I couldn't get a hold of anyone."

"If you can recall, how many voices could you make out?"

"Well, there were like... six of them."

"So, six guys? Five of them left with this kid?"

"Yeah," he said, closing his eyes, thinking back to what he had heard.

"What time was this?"

"I was in bed, it must have been a few in the morning."

Charlie nodded, furiously taking notes.

Back at the lab, Jack was grumbling:

"These things don't even work," he said, shaking his head, examining his bloody fingers. They had pulled the body out of the fountain previously, and Jack was in the middle of preforming an autopsy. The boy's scalp was completely unscathed, not a hair out of place. "There are just so many fucking things wrong with this fucking case, it's fucking insane."He poured a few resin test tubes into a stainless steel centrifuge.

"The kids' hairs weren't radioactive," he said, "they were normal. I tested the blood, but they all came back normal. The

kid's bones weren't shattered, just fractured... which makes no sense."

"What about your blood samples?" Charlie asked, "you say there was no rape?"

Jack turned around. Charlie had returned with a bag full of notes, he had been busy.

Jack shook his head: "Yeah, no rape. But fuck, I don't even know what the fuck I'm doing anymore."

Charlie didn't look convinced:

"You don't even have any leads?"

"No, but this kid was a killer. He probably killed the wrong guy's daughter, then the cops picked him up, and some asshole detective fucked up the interrogation and it all went downhill from there."

Charlie kept shaking his head.

"This is an awful case, Charlie."

"Yeah, I know. The cops around here really are areseholes."

Jack raised an eyebrow: "Which cops are those?"

"All of them."

"Yeah," Jack said, "exactly."

"I don't know, maybe they're just stupid."

"It's not just that," Jack said, "that's just the local precinct."

"Well," Charlie said, "all of this also means that they're probably connected. That means all of this shit is spread across multiple cities. Just because none of them are connected, doesn't mean they're not, they're just fucking stupid."

"But what do we do now?"

Charlie ignored the question. He handed Jack a stack of notes he'd made:

"Here, Jack. I don't have a lot, but this'll do."

"All of this, this list of young people, all killed by some kid."

"All of it."

"Jack," Charlie said, "I'm not even sure how you found out this kid was killing people."

"His hands are not the hands of an innocent boy."

"So... who was the killing?"

"I don't know. I guess that's why we're here, right?" He paused for a moment, "to find out?"

"If we find out, maybe that'll lead us to his killers."

Jack eyed Charlie: "So, any leads?"

"I made a list of all the unsolved murders in this city, and a good amount of them seem to follow a pattern."

"Pattern?"

"Yeah, you know, guys walking down the street, staring into their phones, then people screaming, then dead bodies, it makes sense."

"Yeah," Jack said, "that's all we have so far."

"Like I said, I don't have a lot."

Jack nodded: "So, what else do we have?"

Charlie shook his head: "Nothing."

"What do we do now?"

"We wait for you to come up with something."

"Stop being coy, Charlie. You have a bag full of notes, you've been hard at work. Tell me something, even if you're not sure if I'll believe you."

Charlie hesitated: "Okay, a guy named Klaus Orlowski killed some college kids and then the cops killed him."

"Huh?"

"It was obvious, right? The cops all loved him. They made a memorial right in front of his office, and they're still using the building he lived in as an office."

"Jesus..." Jack said.

"He looked just like the boy who was killed, only older. Apparently he was his father. Every day he'd wear the same suit, the same black shirt, the same red tie. That's right, the same. They even found an old rifle, but he'd put it away, he never even used it. They were just fucking suspicious about that."

"So he was... connected?"

Charlie nodded: "His son's name was Alex, and they didn't even have a name for their son before Klaus died. When Klaus' wife died, and her death was ruled as an accident."

"You think Klaus might be connected to the murders?"

"I think it's his best chance at getting attention from the grave."

"So why did they just cover up the death of his son?"

"To make people think the kid was just a tragedy, an accident."

"But you believe the murders are linked."

Charlie paused: "I don't know... I don't want to think about this anymore, I want to fuck a girl and get high."

"Sounds like a plan."

"I'll see you tomorrow."

The next day, they were examining the body, when Jack realized something: "There are no abrasion marks on the wrist," he said, "no sign of a struggle."

"You think they ambushed him? Maybe tranquilized him or knocked him out?"

"They would have to be subtle," Jack said, "a gunfight at this point, it'd be in the papers for sure."

Charlie sighed: "I thought we weren't looking at anyone from the government."

"Oh, they're everywhere,—everyone is."

"Besides us."

"Yes, and that's what makes us the most qualified detectives in all of England."

They kept sifting through the evidence until they came upon a giant photo. The other one looked pretty good, but this one was huge, so they were both in awe of the detail.

Jack was close enough to see a few details that weren't visible on the other photos:

"This guy, Klaus, he looks like he had a lot of money."

"Yeah, Jack? That's the whole thing,—He looks like he was really well off."

"He used his wealth to cover up murders and hide behind very strong lawyers."

"Good for him."

"If we can find out the secret behind these murders, we can figure out who killed his son."

"We should find the aunt, Alex's aunt."

So they tracked her down, and knocked on her door. They must have been knocking for a full minute straight before the door swung open, and a woman stared them down with what looked like a cross between hatred and disbelief.

"What do you want?" She said, eyeing them up and down.

"We wanted to ask you some questions about your nephew, and your brother."

The woman straightened her back: "Why?"

Charlie invited himself into the house, his imposing frame enough to stifle any attempt at protest from women:

"He was found murdered in his garden. The local police dismissed it as an accident, saying the boy had simply wandered off. Clearly that wasn't the case, his head was viciously severed from his body, miss. Did your nephew have any enemies?"

The woman stared into Charlie's eyes. Her gaze was so heavy-lidded that she almost seemed drugged.

"I... I don't know who you're talking about... My nephew was a great kid. I really don't know what you're talking about."

Charlie ignored her and kept his face a stone mask:

"You wouldn't lie to us?" He said, "we would be more than happy to hear what you have to say, but, if you don't want to tell us, it won't stop us. I'm Charlie Adair, this is Jack Dormer, we're detectives."

He stood in front of her, looking at the woman straight in the eye. She stood without making a move.

"I haven't spoken to or seen my nephew in years," she said, sounding like she was speaking from the dead.

"Then why do we have a photo of you smiling with him from just a few weeks ago?"

She didn't blink: "Why indeed? Who's giving you the green light to snoop around?"

"God did. Now be honest. When did you last see your nephew?"

"I... I don't know."

"Okay, then," Jack said, "we're gonna have to take you in for a little lie detector test."

"No!" The woman protested.

Jack drew his handgun, an FN five-seven, and pointed it at her head: "Do you really want to fight us?"

She gulped.

"We're not going to hurt you, we're just going to ask you some questions."

She seemed taken aback. She folded her arms and stood there, glowering, slowly shifting her weight back and forth.

"You really think we're gonna gun you down?" Said Charlie.

"I would like to believe that you wouldn't, but with you, I don't know... it's hard to know," she said, staring down the barrel of Jack's pistol.

"What's your name, miss?" Jack asked.

"Allie McBride."

"Listen, Mrs McBride, Alex was just a kid, wasn't he?"

"Yes," she said, giving a curt nod.

"You had no idea how dangerous this boy was, did you?"

"I... I had an inkling."

"So, the police were right all along? None of these incidents were accidents, right?"

"Do you really think a small-town, innocent-looking farm boy, killing another boy on his way home from school, was an accident?" She asked.

"Well, you have some information that might make things a little easier," Jack said, turning to the woman, "do you remember what happened that night?"

She stared down at the ground, her eyes flicked between Jack and Charlie.

"Go on," Jack said, "I know you do."

"I remember the shot... it came from the woods."

"What about the blood?" Asked Charlie.

"I guess I killed a deer that night. I think Alex had a flashlight."

"Hold on," said Jack, "who has been watching Alex since his parents died?"

"His foster parents."

"Where are they now?"

"In Japan."

Charlie snorted:

"So, they just up and left, great."

"Hey," said Jack, "my question is: Who has been taking care of him while they were away?"

Allie stared down at the ground again. It was becoming more and more apparent what was happening. Jack held the gun steadily: "Don't think about doing anything you'd regret," he said, "If you do, I won't hesitate, do you understand?"

She stared down at the ground.

Charlie looked back and forth between Jack and Allie: "Hold on," he said, "where's your husband?"

Allie burst down in tears. Jack and Charlie looked at each other,—realization dawned on their faces.

"He was being abused," Charlie said, "by the people who were supposed to be watching him."

"So you say," said Jack, still aiming at Allie.

"She was forced to leave Alex alone in the house with his adopted parents. I took a look at the barn, where they were staying, and eventually got a look at Alex's room. His foster parents were beating him. He was forced to do chores. They wouldn't let him play video games, they made him eat vegetables, they made him learn multiplication tables, and every single one of them was beating the crap out of him... So he killed them. And then he killed the cops who didn't protect him. And then he just started killing people randomly... He killed your husband, didn't he?"

"Yes..." She responded.

"And did you see the look in his eyes?"

Allie was starting to cry. She stared down at the ground.

Jack turned to Charlie: "It seems it wasn't just one man, or even a group of people, that killed Alex... no, it was many people, perhaps thousands. He'd always enjoyed playing video games, so he was in the woods most of the time, killing villagers.

This entire village, including the precinct, is responsible for Alex's death. And if I had my way, they would all suffer for it."

Jack lowered his gun.

"You don't understand! His foster parents were disciplining him because he was out of control. They'd gotten tired of it and started beating him... He was always doomed to be a menace."

"Your husband was a menace too," said Charlie, "he was abusive to you."

"Shut up!" Screamed Allie.

"There you go again," said Jack, "don't think about doing anything you'd regret. Just do as I say."

Charlie smiled.

Jack started to slowly walk toward Allie.

She stared at the gun. He pointed it at her head.

"Don't you dare shoot me," she said.

He lowered the gun again, and then placed it on a table in the room. He turned around, and, followed by Charlie,—walked out the house.

They were about half a block away, when they heard a single gunshot ring from that very house.

Jack looked back. There was no smoke, no flames, but the light inside had gone out.

Charlie was quiet for a while:

"Why do you think he did it?" He finally asked.

Jack shrugged: "All I know is that he did."

Jack & Charlie Get Stranded on an Island. Cap. XVII.

TAlking idly, in an abandoned seaside-building, Jack and Charlie passed the time: "I know the feeling," said Jack, "I can feel it too. Sometimes at night, when you're lying in your bed and you can hear all the other houses going on around you,—it's awful! You can feel them all moving along, and you can feel them all thinking and feeling, and planning. All the time."

"Yes," said Charlie, "it's wonderful! Just like when the sun rises in the morning, when the whole sky's full of the tiniest little stars. But it's all sad, when you think of it."

"What's sad?"

"If you were the only person in the world, it's sad, you'd feel awful, you know?"

"Well," said Jack, "I don't think I'd like to be the only person in the world. If I was, I'd get mad very easily, and shoot myself."

"Right."

"Of course, if I were the only person in the world, I wouldn't be able to do it on account of the noise, not to mention the trouble of getting the gun." Remarked Jack, thinking of the cruel rules which governed life on the island.

"What would you do then?" Charlie inquired.

"I think I'd go out and shoot my reflection in the water."

"Good luck!"

"But, after a bit, I don't think I'd do that. Well, what would you do, then?"

"I don't know. Well, I'll tell you, I'd go out and scream."

"Oh! Why?"

"Because it would be wonderful. That's what I'd do."

"But, what would you scream for?"

"Why, because I would be alone in the world, Jack, that's what I'd do,—I'd scream."

"What would you do after that?"

"Well, I don't know, I'd fly into a dance, and dance until I was too old to fly anymore, then I'd cry."

Jack and Charlie talked in this vein for a little while longer, and then Jack went out into the morning. He had a thirst for fresh air, and a desire to feel the fresh sun on his face, and the pure, cool stream of the heavens on his back. His lop-sided sense of reality did not permit of much direct pleasure in the events of the day. His enjoyment came through indirect means, and was made even better by the careful selection of what he could actually enjoy. As for Charlie, it was the constant excitement of his life, the hurry and the bustle and the frequent

breaks, in which he had to sit alone, and contemplate the eternal dreariness of life,—that held the greatest allure for him.

For many days, Jack and Charlie lived like this. Jack was somewhat more self-contained than Charlie, and it was not only when he was thinking of his self, that he gave a distinct feeling of loneliness.

The sea was always at the front of Jack's mind, and his thoughts ran constantly to its dark and moody horizon. He had so often watched it through the windows of the dive, and his eye was so keen, that the foam-tufted breakers seemed to come alive. He imagined himself to be a captain of some great ship, as he stood with his hand on the rail, and his head turned toward the heavens. He had even once in his youthful days imagined that he could see one or two figures moving to and fro out on the darkening decks, and he had come to the island, full of pleasure at the thought of seeing such people again. When he saw them, though, they did not appear to know him, and when he spoke to them, they did not hear him.

Meanwhile, Charlie was occupied with the recollections of his youth: "Dear old dad," he said in his piping voice, "he was such a handsome, big, red-headed man."

He began to weep bitterly: "I think of him sometimes, I know I do, and it makes me cry. He's not coming back, and if he is, I'm not going to see him."

Jack supposedly had no experience of this kind of anguish. For him, death was merely a word, and he gave no thought to the prospect of his own dissolution. He was filled with thoughts of God, and he believed that he was going to heaven when he died.

Charlie's grief, was, of course, feigned, but only insofar as the mournful truths of the nature of the human heart could be feigned and displayed by a masterful actor. For such a thing to be feigned, Charlie figured, it must become real. And the deep sadness of his gloom revealed a poignant wisdom in its realization.

"You've never seen a better view of a sunset than you've seen here in the shallow end," Charlie remarked, while the sun was going down one evening, "And you've never felt so at one with the water as you have here."

Jack turned to him:

"That may be so, but we are still stranded on this island."

"There's no hurry, you know that. We're far enough out, that we're safe from them for a while. We've been here long enough for you to get used to the salt and the flies, and we'll always have the island to ourselves."

"But, Charlie, what about in a few days' time, when we get close to the coast? Will they find us then?"

"I don't think so. This is a good-sized bay, they'll be sure to have missed us by then. And what do you think? I've been waiting this hour for you to ask me this."

"What?"

"Whatever, man," Charlie sighed, heading back to his enormously comfortable and sturdy tent. It was made out of a variety of materials, such as canvas, felt, twine, and fishnet. His sleeping mat was tied together with one end of a dried bush, which had been pulled from the sea and used to make a rough pillow; the other end was fastened to the outside of the tent. He had made the top out of bits of driftwood, and studded it with sea-glass. There was a large canvas tarpaulin, and at the entrance, he had constructed a plank of boards.

As he drew near, he noticed that his companion was still staring out at the water.

"Night approaches, Jack, you should head to your tent."

Jack didn't answer, he was staring into the night, waiting for the stars to reveal themselves.

Charlie gazed at his friend. He was not thinking of him in any ordinary sense, of course, he was thinking of him as a presence. He knew that he was not just a person, his presence had somehow been inside of him for the past ten years or more. And the sensation, as he looked at Jack, was not just of the man's presence, but of his presence as a separate entity.

Jack stirred, and the glance was transferred from his wide and tired eyes to his drawn and haggard face.

"What's the matter, Charlie?"

"Didn't you hear me? Night approaches, and bandits and wild beasts prowl 'cross these shores-"

"There is no hurry."

"How can you be so blasé about this?" Charlie was becoming agitated. He turned back to look out over the water again.

"Charlie," Jack said, very slowly, "how long has it been since we became stranded here?"

"Eight months," he answered, after a moment's hesitation.

"And remind me again, what part of the world are we in?"

Charlie shivered. He shrugged his shoulders in a way which bespoke the terror of his memories:

"We're in the Pacific, as far as I can tell."

Jack leaned back, clutching the soles of his feet:

"The stars are out, lad. Tell me some myths about the constellations... What's that?" He pointed at one.

Against his better judgment, Charlie walked over to him and sat down on a nearby log:

"That's the phallus of some giant water monster called Shiwa; a sign of a powerful man. They say that when it's standing straight up the silhouette of a man should pass it, but when it's bent down it becomes the head of a water serpent. That's why they call the islands here: The Islands of the Knobby One."

"Interesting..." Jack was fascinated, he had always liked legends and myths, and he liked to study them, "what about the red star?" He asked, pointing again.

Charlie waved it away: "That's Guanyin, she's considered the holiest of all goddesses."

"But aren't all goddesses sacred?"

Charlie blinked: "Well, sure, but I don't think she's exactly in the same league as-"

"What's her temple called?" Jack cut in.

Charlie frowned: "I forget... I've never seen it. But, I remember her from a summer when I was eight or nine. My family

went to a restaurant that served seaweed salad, and all the girls were supposed to have seaweed hair; It never worked out for me, I could never get the hair to stand up."

"That's funny."

"Not really. I just thought it was funny at the time."

"Oh, you're just jealous."

"What? What the hell are you talking about?"

"You know, you'd hate to admit it, but you do wish you could have a full head of hair," Jack said, not unkindly.

Charlie stared at him.

"Bruv, I shaved my hair, I am not balding. And you know what? It feels..." he struggled to find the word, "blazin'!"

"Then why does your neck look like an ear?"

"I... what?"

"Your neck looks like a donkey's ass. You know, a jackass with a thick neck."

Charlie turned on him:

"Wooah-hoa! Slow down! I'm not-" he stopped. Then he grinned, "lad, your appearance is that of a seven year old boy wearing a fake beard."

Jack cackled at that. Charlie started laughing, and the two started balling over, barely containing themselves, as tears started rolling from their eyes. Just then, Charlie heard a twig snap. He muffled Jack, and shushed him, and gestured to where the sound came from. Jack nodded in understanding, and Charlie removed his hand.

"What was that?" Jack mouthed.

"I don't know, it sounded like an animal or something, but I don't know what it was." Charlie was whispered.

"What can it mean?"

Charlie was looking into the trees:

"Not sure, that's the weirdest thin, it sounded just like," he pointed into the forest, "just like an animal, maybe a deer. But it was too quiet. Look, I don't think they got me. They went into the jungle and didn't come out again. Now, they've got to

be trying to get me. They know I'm on this island. They know where I'm headed."

"Alright," Jack whispered, "Follow me, cover me."

Charlie nodded. He drew his sawed-off shotgun, a Kai-Tec TJ-95, and followed Jack, who went to his tent and rummaged through his weapons.

Jack paused. He grabbed a blowgun, a hunting knife and a throwing knife, and a pair of ear muffs.

"Here."

Charlie looked at the knife. He put it in his belt.

Jack then grabbed a crossbow, which he gave to Charlie, and then slung a recurve bow over his shoulder. Finally, he grabbed an AK-74, a net, some string, and some hand traps.

"Just in case..."

"Why did you want me to follow you to your tent? I have plenty of my own weapons there," Charlie asked.

"Because-"

Suddenly, they heard a rustling in the bushes. They got into cover positions, peering out of the tent to see what was going on.

Out of the bushes, twenty or so feet away, slowly crept: A giant gorilla. It had a skin with the same bright greenish-blue as that of the lizards they had killed and cooked the previous night. In it's hand was a metal staff and, in it's other,—a huge branch.

"Oh hell no!" Charlie exclaimed.

He grabbed a carbine—an old SKS—and fired at the gorilla. The gorilla looked at the two of them and growled. The branch swung in an arc towards Jack, flying towards him. He dove into the tent but the Gorilla was bounding towards them. Charlie grabbed his shotgun and began to fire. The Gorilla howled in pain but did not slow down as it struck the tent with its staff. The gun bucked as it fired, spraying shot everywhere. The staff crashed into the tent and rattled the supports, causing it to crumble. Charlie dove, fired again. Jack grabbed a macuahuitl and swung it at the Gorilla.

The Gorilla fell through them, it's legs unable to hold. Jack's gun tore into the gorilla, as well as the tent, which had by now

already mostly collapsed. As Jack reload, Charlie ended the ape's life with a shot through the eye.

The noises of the gunfire had barely died away when Charlie could hear the guttural voices of the ghouls in the jungle. The ghouls, of course, were the unidentified creatures that haunted the night with terrifying warbles, that Jack and Charlie could only recently tolerate.

"Is that thing dead?" Asked Jack.

"Yes," Charlie huffed.

"Why would you shoot at it when it didn't even see us?"

Charlie looked at Jack incredulously:

"So we can eat it," he answered.

Jack paused, then shrugged: "Makes sense, I suppose."

Gorilla meat, Charlie realized, tasted much like pheasant.

The jungle was still the same as it had been when they had been in a bush plane. Hanging vines, leafless trees, nothing but jungle. Slowly, though, as they approached, they noticed the black shapes of the trees become more distinct, and they could make out shades of green, in between the lifeless leaves. Suddenly, a branch snapped behind them. Charlie turned around, his carbine still in hand, but saw nothing. Then, another branch snapped behind him. Charlie turned around again, but saw nothing. Another branch snapped behind him, as he turned and faced it. The branch came in a full arc, and knocked Charlie's carbine away from his grasp. Jack, too, spun around, and saw nothing but tree branches. Then, Jack saw what Charlie had,—something coming out of the underbrush.

"Holy shit, it's a goddamn monkey!"

The animal seemed to know they were there. As it picked up speed, it leapt with unnatural strength and landed before them, where it devoured Jack's carbine whole. It stood upright and came right at Charlie, holding a strange metal stick in it's hand.

Charlie pulled the shotgun from his pack and aimed. It recoiled and tried to raise its hand to block Charlie's shot, but before it could, Charlie fired, sending it toppling backwards.

"Charlie!" Jack yelled, "what's going on?"

Charlie wasn't sure what was going on, or what it was, but he knew one thing: He had to put this whole nightmare behind him, and for that, he knew he needed to stop being such a Luddite, and learn about technology.

As they took a drink from their water skins, Charlie found a flashlight and a small circuit board, an LED light, and a button.

"Quick, Jack, have you done anything with that stick, a button or a switch?"

"Yeah," Jack said, "I put the compass into the ring at the end of the stick."

"Good, do you realize what's happening right now?"

"What?"

"These apes and monkeys... they are using tools. Probably left by other people stranded on this island, or a people who died out long ago. Or, most terrifying, maybe... they made these weapons themselves."

"But," said Jack, "they couldn't make a device that would attract attention..."

"Which means," Charlie cut in, "they had something else, a way to warn, a message. And that means that they had to know we were going to be coming."

Jack gulped: "We need to get off this fucking island, Charlie."

"It's much too late to try to do that on our own. I've radioed the coastguard, and they've dispatched a naval ship. It'll be here soon, if not, I guess we'll have to start digging graves."

"What fucking coast guard?"

"The Canadian Coast Guard, they've been trying to explore this part of the Pacific, I hear."

"Jesus..."

"Look, let's get back to camp, and make some food out of this monkey, we're going to need it."

Jack was a good woodsman, but this was uncharted territory for him. Charlie had never been a man of the woods. He was a navigator, a linguist. They'd not survived this long by simply being in the right place at the right time, they had survived by being one step ahead.

"There is something so wrong about these animals, Charlie."

"Yeah, it's like we were cursed, or something."

Jack pressed the button. A red light ſtarted flashing on the green button. The green button lit up the tips of the arrows in the pack. The green button lit up the laſt button on the circuit board.

"You realize, Jack, if we send out a signal, then all the animals that aren't afraid of it will realize we're here?"

"We have a lot of weapons, they'll be afraid of these inſtead."

Charlie nodded.

The two of them gazed at the cooking corpse of the monkey.

"They're coming," Jack said, his voice low and deadly.

"They're everywhere, Jack, we need to escape from here before it's too late."

Jack looked at the floor: "If you're right..."

"We can't juſt run from this."

Jack nodded again.

They sat down. They did not open their eyes when they heard the whir of a helicopter's blades, as it hovered over them. The helicopter landed, there was a slithery sound as the doors opened. An ape peered out, and gazed at the two of them:

"I don't smell bananas. I can't smell bananas."

Jack & Charlie Seek out the Dutchman. Cap. XVIII.

AS Jack was inſpecting some antique cigar boxes, which he had ordered online,—he noticed a bundle of papers fall out of one of them. Upon examining it, he saw that it was in fact a pamphlet titled: "The Dutchman, or: The Wicked & Debaſed Exploits of an Anonymous Netherlandiſh Fiend."

"Well I'll be, a piece of literature!" He exclaimed.

Charlie, who was reclining in the same room responded:

"What's it say Jack?" He asked.

Jack read the title out loud.

"I didn't know you could speak Dutch Jack."

"It's written in English, Charlie, and we're Englishmen, what luck!" Jack said excitedly.

He sat down next to Charlie and began to read the text:

THE DUTCHMAN.

OR

The Wicked & Debaſed Exploits of an Anonymous Netherlandiſh Fiend.

Read, but don't practice, for the compilers of this work find that they which live honeſtly have the moſt quiet minds. Yet one muſt always remember: *Omnia praeſumuntur legitime facta donec probetur in contrarium.*

Written by the Right Honourable Plonius, and containing the following chapters:

I. *The Dutchman Violates the Laſt Dodo Bird.*
II. *The Dutchman Violates Four Indian Gentlemen.*
III. *The Dutchman Violates Charles II of England.*
IIII. *The Dutchman Violates Mount Veſuvius.*
V. *The Dutchman Reflects Upon His Rape Conqueſts.*

LONDON.

Printed by Nemo Pſeudonimus, on Sauce Street, Near the Tobacconiſt.

MDCXL.

The Right Honourable Plonius.

Doctor of both Law and Phyſic, and generally well known and well regarded; depicted here, by his good friend Richard Norwood.

THE DUTCHMAN. VIOLATES The Laſt Dodo Bird. Chap 1.

THE Dutchman rapes the very laſt Dodo Bird. He rapes it so relentleſſly, gripping it, holding it down on the end of a gun and poking the thing with a ſtick. And he gets it down on the ground in the ſame exact ſpot and the laſt Dodo Bird looks ſtraight into the Dutchman's eyes. He ſtares into the eyes of his rapiſt as the Dutchman finiſhes what the Dutchman ſtarted. And he ſtops fighting and gives the Dutchman what he wants. And the Dutchman drags, drags it back to his boat and ties it up and he rapes it again, and then one more time. He rapes the laſt Dodo Bird so ruthleſſly that it eventually dies. The Dutchman is proud. But he could not bring himſelf to have it towed out to his boat. He puts it in a little box and gets a rope and he wraps it up, and he brings it back to his houſe. He puts it in a large cage and a cable is ſtrung up so that the cage is ſuſpended on the roof of his houſe. It rains in the Netherlands, so it rains on the Dutchman's roof. And he hangs the

cage on his roof and he's proud and he's ſad. But he's happy that he finiſhed what he ſet out to do.

The Dutchman Violates Four Indian Gentlemen. Chap. 2.

THE Dutchman rapes four Indian gentlemen who themſelves raped a lizard beaſt. He is violating and fucking all four of them, fucking them hard and good—they are ſo ſcared and ſorry that they raped that lizard beaſt, as their aſſes are prolapſed becauſe they have been raped, and their aſſes are so hot. Their aſſes are so hard becauſe of the rape that they are fucked like by themſelves. And the whole compound has been raped by the Dutchman, raping all five of the Indian gentlemen with his fiſts. And after that he beats them up even more; ſo badly that they are covered with blood. And now the Dutchman is raping the Indian gentlemen even harder, kicking them around ſo violently, fucking them violently. And he is brutally beating the Indian gentlemen, hitting them violently in their faces, banging their faces violently, beating them brutally. And the Indian gentlemen are not fighting back,—but being beaten and raped with the fiſts and the feet and the fiſts and the feet, the fiſts and the feet. The Indians who are completely exhauſted, they cannot fight back anymore, they are exhauſted. The Indians who are terrified now—are being beaten with the fiſts and the feet and the fiſts and the feet. And they are

ſcreaming, *Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God.* Screaming deſperately. And the Dutchman is now fucking all of them with his huge fiſts, and the Indians are being violently beaten and raped in the aſs and mouth, with the fiſts and the feet and the fiſt. And the Indian gentlemen are fucking up and down violently in the face with their fiſts. And they are ſcreaming with the ſounds of fuck and fuck and fuck, they are ſcreaming brutally. And the whole compound is filled with the ſound of people fucking ſcreaming. But now there is no one ſcreamingwith the ſound of fuck and fuck and fuck,—fuck.

The Dutchman Violates Charles II of England. Chap. 3.

CHARLES II finds himſelf being raped by the Dutchman. His aſs is weak, his dick is ſhriveled. The Dutchman howls, ſmacking Charles' aſs as he ſpreads his cheeks to bury his cock in the fucker. Charles whimpers, holding the back of his neck, wailing, as he's brutally fucked like a feral animal. His aſs is on fire, he fucks back without mercy, juſt so the Dutchman can be the ſtrongeſt fucker around around. The Dutchman brutally rips the fucker's dick from Charles' aſs, drilling his own into his gut, growling like a madman as he lays there helpleſs, ſcreaming in pain, the agony returning to his body like a poiſon he can't get rid of. When the Dutchman rips the fucker's aſs wide open, he yells out

in agony, *Fuck. Fuck! Fuck! Oh, fuck, fuck! I fucked the hell out of this bitch's aſs. I fucking fuck her wide open, ſhe don't feel me, juſt keep fucking her. I'm gonna fuck her to death, ſhe'll be dead after I fucking fuck her for two minutes.* He pulls back on the aſſhole, ſlamming it deep again. He ſcreams, fucking back into the cunt's guts like a wild dog. Charles feels the Dutchman's face againſt his, ſcraping his face in his aſs as he rips him up. *I've never fucked an aſſhole, I fucked this bitch for two minutes, ſhe'll be dead by the time I finiſh fucking her,* the Dutchman grunts out, slapping Charles' aſs, making him ſcream out in agony. He pounds the fucker's aſs mercileſſly, taking his dick all the way out of the hole, pounding back into it, ſmaſhing his dick into the fucker's guts. Charles loſes his ſhit. He cries out, ſcreaming into the roofing as he dies. *Goddamn, you ſtupid baſtard. I fucking fucked you and you don't even feel me? Go to hell you ſtupid bitch! Go to hell you piece of ſhit!* The Dutchman finiſhes fucking him, ſmacking him back with his cock. He pulls out, ſlamming it back into the fucker's aſs. *I fucked you real good,* he ſays.

The Dutchman Violates Mount Veſuvius. Chap. 4.

THE Dutchman is raping mount Veſuvius. How?—By elevating it higher into the air by drawing a belt up through the cracks of the volcano's toe. How elſe? He pulls out his Dutch cock, ſweeps up any duſty ſtones and rock debris and

bruſhes away the earth that would otherwiſe have fallen into the cracks and fed the flames. Then he harneſſes the giant cock in his hands. Then he fucks it, mud and rock, bringing up the ſweet, earthy odor of mud and rock, and exuding the ripe ſmell of urine and piſs. Eventually, he is drawing the mount upwards, like a drawbridge, almoſt completely out of the ground. He now mounts the volcano. The Dutchman is raping mount Veſuvius, gripping it's magma veins between his huge fingers. We watch him mount the volcano for another hour. As he digs deep into the earth and pulls out the hot rock, he lights a bonfire in his eye-blinding orgaſm. Brutally violating mount Veſuvius, while our eyes watch in diſbelief. We cheer for him and cheer for the Dutchman's magnificent mountain, taking turns feeling the truth. We know that Krakatoa is next, we know that the Dutchman is going to create more aſh clouds and make the beaches turn black. The Dutchman can't be ſtopped, he is raping mount Veſuvius, gripping it's magma veins between his huge fingers, fusing the volcano into himſelf. The Dutchman is raping mount Veſuvius, grinding the mount into the mud. He is ruthleſs.

The Dutchman Reflects Upon His Rape Conqueſts. Chap. 5.

THE Dutchman reflects on all his rape conqueſts. He has raped so many. So many desperate women. Always with a handſome ſmile.

Always in the night. Always dreſſed up. Always quick and willing. Always high on drugs. Always high on hope. So many men. So much rape. No one to defend. Nothing to defend. No one to care. Nothing to care. So he kills the women. Without being found out. It is a lot of killing. No one knows. The police and the courts juſt offer up more men to rape. How could they? No one knows. Juſt the raping. No hope. No conſequences. Juſt rape. So the Dutchman tries to catch his breath. But the blood and glands are pumping. He wants to get another rape in before the police find out. He has to do ſomething. He wants to do ſomething. That is the problem. He has loſt his morals. He is not sure what he wants. But he craves the sweet scream of an animal as he rapes it. He wants to touch the ſcreaming woman. He wants to feel her ſuffering. He wants to scream himſelf. He is addicted to rape. But he has no time to think. He muſt find a bunny to rape. No bunny here. But a cat. There are lots of cats. That is what the cat lovers say. They are on to him. They have no time to think. They are quick. They kill ſo quick. But he is quick. He is faſter. He rapes faſteſt. No time for killing. Juſt rape and rape and rape. Sixty cats and sixty rabbits. Nothing like killing. Sometimes a cat will break looſe. Only about ten ſeconds. An inſtant. Only about fifteen minutes to ſave a cat from a brutal rape. At leaſt when you kill they are alive and ſometimes in pieces. So he tries to get away. He has to get away. But ſomething makes him look back, and that is rape.

FINIS.

Jack had finished reading.

"Blimey! What an interesting figure this Dutchman," said Charlie, "what do you think of it, Jack?"

"I'm not sure Charlie, I just know that we have to find this man, if he is still counted among the living."

"But how do we find him Jack?"

"I suppose we can always take a look at the national archives."

Looking through any available documents, they located some historical sources which were of great aid in their search. This "Dutchman" had apparently been a serial rapist who had terrorized London from 1639 until 1644. Although in the present day it would be considered illegal, the Dutchman at the time was viewed as a god among men. Everyone wanted to be served by this Dutchman, and it would be very tough to reinstate the proper social hierarchy of society, if the Dutchman were to continue to rape as many as he could. And if that were to happen, the entire world would be in peril.

One day, on July of 1640, the Dutchman raped a young lady, having raped her two or three times prior to that evening. She was known as *Mary Wright*, a twenty-one-year-old married mother of two young children. She was a beautiful young lady, by anyone's standards, and very likely had a great deal to offer a man such as the Dutchman.

"Look at this one Charlie," Jack opened a sizable tome and showed it to his friend.

"This is getting saucy, Jack!"

"It sure is."

"The Dutchman has a checkered past: Admitted to the Dutch Court of Justice in 1715, he was found guilty of a hundred known counts of indecency. He was sentenced to perpetual imprisonment and to be castrated, however, he was freed by the aid of a merchant's wife known as *Belle Sacre*. Apparently he was ultimately pardoned by a Dutch Judge *Hartman Holland*, also known as *Franz*, who himself was subsequently torn to pieces by an angry mob."

They did some more research and determined that the next best stop in their search was the damp land of Frisia.

Jack and Charlie become embroiled in a whole variety of illegal and immoral acts, including giving free entertainment in the local prison,—thus helping to reduce the prisoners' recidivism rate—maintaining a ring of prostitutes, which at first seemed to be run by the National League of Crime,—who were a political body similar to the KKK. Finally, they had found themselves in a Frisian pub, discussing their next move.

"So we just kill this guy?" Asked Jack.

"Sure, we can take him and stuff him in a sack. Then we'll throw him over the back of the boat. If anyone asks, we'll say we were trying to fish him out."

"C'mon, I know you're not gonna do that. We need to use him for our own sadistic pleasures."

"Whatever, the Frisians will be busy singing, trying to drown each other."

"Where's the Dutchman?" Jack's body looked at Charlie.

A deformed fat man in a large gray coat had overheard them, and made his way to their table.

"You're looking for the Dutchman?" He said, in what was clearly an American Cajun accent.

Jack and Charlie were both silent.

The man sat down at their table and spoke:

"You see this face? This what the Dutchman did to me. I've been seeking the bastard ever since. And I know where he is, but I've gone broke, I can't get to him on my own. Name's Ben 'Ney,' former Midshipman. If you two could help me charter a ship, I would take you to the place... I am sure he is there."

"Mr. Ben, we just want to talk to the man, not kill him."

Ney looked at Jack and dragged his hand across his molested face. He was silent for moment and then said:

"I just want to know if the Dodo is a reality or a farce."

"It is neither, we can prove it. I can explain that," Jack said, with his best "Marlon Brando smirk."

"But how can we trust you, how do we know this is the Dutchman, the prolific rapist of both vegetable, animal and mineral?" Charlie asked.

"There are stories I've heard across the Baltic sea, stories of this Dutch man who could cure cancer, blindness, diabetes, baldness... Some said that he was a fraud, a sham, just some midget bribed with whatever funds were on the table."

"What about us, Mr. Ben?"

"What about you?"

"You have no proof, he might not be real. He might just be a con man. His story has really taken off; I think people think that he is really a god, a unicorn, some guy that lives under the sea that you can see if you really look at him... a mermaid."

"But I have evidence that he exists."

"Fine," Charlie said, "we will go to hell for the Dutchman. It's worth the shot. Alright, how much?"

"Hmm, I'd normally say five thousand, maybe ten, but I like you, and I've got a really good feeling about this... Fine,—five thousand."

Ney reached into his pocket and withdrew a large black money clip.

"Have you heard of the term 'United Nations'?" He asked. "Well, boys," he continued, in his thick Cajun accent, "I say it there a concept thought up by the political scientist and businessman Hans von Ohain. Think of it as an imaginary world government,—you heard me,—it's an international organization made up of peoples from all around the world, that like... They support each other and prevent... well, I don't know what happens, but in theory they would prevent any wars from breaking out."

"Alright, let's charter a ship, and see if it exists," said Charlie.

"I like you, boy, I like you..."

"But how is this United Nations supposed to help us find the Dutchman?" Said Jack, "there is no United Nations, and even if there is, who knows if the Dutchman is exists."

"We know that he does exist," said Ney, "and this is important, this is history. For the first time in history, three men from different countries, including from right here in Germany, have come together to fight crime. And we have people on our side, we can count on the people of the United Nations. They won't let us down. Just name the ship. Give me the details, the name of the harbor. I will make sure we get there in time."

"I don't know about this one, Charlie," Jack whispered, "what if *he's* the Dutchman?.. This 'United Nations' sounds just as fanciful as he does."

"Look at me, boy. I'm not a nutcase. I'm a Navy SEAL, and I can't be more proud to be a part of this. I know that I'll get the money, and the ship. Just let me do this. I'm not asking you for any other favor. Just do this one for me. For the men on the ship. The Dutchman is right here, and he's very real, and very dangerous. So very real, and he wants to destroy you, because you are exactly like him."

"How do you figure?"

"It was years ago, during the time of the German Kaiser. A man was abducted from this very spot, a navy officer that was trying to break up a World War One blockade. He's still a prisoner in the castle right now. The man responsible for taking him is a man by the name of Hans von Ohain. So, just like in the movie, we have to beat him to the castle, to end the Great War, to win the war. The only thing left is for us to find him in the town of Breitenbach. Just look at me, boy, I will find the Dutchman, and he will stop destroying the world."

"So what's the catch?" Charlie asked.

"It's a bunch of nothing," said Ney, "just have faith."

Jack and Charlie were on board the small ship. Three men in black suits were busily going about setting up two cannons, which were now their weapons of choice. With the Dutchman and the monster that would soon be on board, there was no telling what horrors they could unleash on the German population, or the world as a whole.

Ney walked up to the captain: "How long before we get there?" He asked.

"Not long, sir," the captain responded, "it shouldn't take more than three hours."

"Good, get them aboard, give them one last briefing, and then I want you all ready to go, and go quickly; I don't want to get caught in a crossfire."

"Yes, sir!" Jack, Charlie, and the remaining men boarded the ship, and set off. They had no reason to suspect that they were being followed, so there was no need to take extra measures.

The group traveled down the coast of Germany and soon found their destination: A nondescript, nameless, Baltic island.

They docked the ship and alighted. Tapping his helmet's touchpad, the captain set the guns on the decks to fire on sight, and left the men to go and scout out the premises.

Meanwhile, Jack and Charlie went to see what was waiting for them at the castle. Jack went inside first, followed by Charlie.

"So, is this the castle?" Charlie asked as the two walked down the hall.

"Let's hope so," Jack anwsered.

As the two proceeded, they heard some clanking coming from behind one of the many doors in the hallway. As they approached it, they saw a man with a black fedora and trench coat laying on the floor, bleeding heavily. It looked like he had been shot in the chest. Charlie was about to help the man up, but noticed that he was bleeding from his forehead.

"Hey!" Charlie yelled, "what happened to you?!"

"That's the least of your worries," said the man as he rose to his feet, "I should've known I was in trouble when I found that crazy dog... Now you gotta save me."

"I don't think he's conscious," Jack said.

"Shut up. That thing is gonna break my neck. Just look at the stuff this guy is holding. All it's made of is rusted metal. Maybe you guys aren't so bad after all. You are the lucky ones."

Jack and Charlie looked around the room they were in. Charlie looked at the man's equipment, and could tell he was

insane. He pointed at the man, "what's that?" He asked, pointing to the man's wristwatch.

"That," said the man, "is my time-traveling watch. I made it myself. It's supposed to work at the speed of time. Not backwards."

"Doesn't matter, we just have to get out of here," said Jack.

"There's no time!" the man yelled, "if you come with me, there's no telling what's going to happen to me, or to you. But if you leave now, you'll never have to worry about that."

The man stood up and, with a quick swipe of his gun, he knocked out the two Englishmen.

"Well, that didn't go quite as planned," the man said, as he looked down at his fallen victims, "I guess I can't blame you for staying. If you had been me, you would've done the same..."

Jack and Charlie woke up, they were tied to a nearby chair, and were no longer in the castle's main room.

"Charlie! Jack!" The man said, holding a large knife.

"This man is obviously insane," Jack said, "who are you? Are you the Dutchman? Why are you dressed like a German?"

"The Dutchman? That's why you are here? to help me?" The man said, turning to face Jack, "now, you have to listen to me very closely: When you and Charlie came here, you were put in prison. I brought you here because your powers are a natural fit with mine. The people here are evil, plain and simple. You can stop their evil, I'll show you how."

"Sure, why not," Jack said, "my turn to ask a stupid question."

"Why would you want to help us?" Asked Charlie.

"Well, there's a lot of things you two don't know about me. I've already told you about the time traveling and my watch. What you don't know is that I was able to see into your pasts. I've lived there for hundreds of years. I never knew I had powers, but I've had them all this time. Back in the day, I was a normal doctor. In fact, I helped the great Charles Muntz with his experimentation... I still think it was a crime."

"Muntz? Who is he?" Charlie asked.

"Well, back in the day, he was an entrepreneur who made big

plans. He wanted to capture the essence of air itself. It took him years to get a prototype, but when he succeeded, he set his mind on refining the process. He also had another idea that I have always disagreed with. He thought if he couldn't capture air itself, he could capture its byproducts. He put the byproducts into a special gas and had it tested by several people. No one was able to tell the difference. Muntz was certain his invention would work, but one of the people he tested with, Norman Bradford,—a brilliant scientist who died in a car crash a few months after the test—was able to recognize the gas for what it was: It was a *poison gas*, and it killed him. Muntz called the police and told them the device had been tampered with, and he accused Bradford of the crime. Bradford's wife later came to him and told him that it was, in fact, her husband who killed himself. She told him that she had received a note from him, apologizing for what he had done. When she showed the note to the police, the case was closed. Muntz said that the death of Bradford had nothing to do with him, but it was all a lie. It was him all along, and he wanted to punish Bradford's widow. The secret of the deadly gas, of course, was all a lie. Bradford was a genius, but a troubled man... Muntz faked his death to get even with Bradford."

The man wiped his knife on a rag, then proceeded to cut the rope from their arms:

"You two have to help me. I can't keep this up much longer. I need someone who is going to stop me. That's why you came here, didn't you? You're here to kill me?"

"No, we're here for the Dutchman."

"The Dutchman... he's the one who raped me."

"He raped you?" Charlie asked.

"He wanted my watch, but I hid it from him, so he punished me; he raped me... six times, that's why I need to be free."

"How can we help?" Asked Jack.

"I need you to find the Dutchman and stop him."

"He must be out there somewhere. Can you show us?"

"He's in a cottage down the coast. Watch the sunset."

"We're here to find the Dutchman," said Jack, "but I don't think we have time to kill you."

"Time? Time!? Whatever," the man said, "go, don't worry about time. There's no time, as we all know... just go.

After being freed, they made their way down the coast until they saw him there, laying in the shade under a tree next to an old cottage.

"That has to be him," said Charlie

"Let us put an end to this inquiry once and for all, Charlie, that's our man right there!"

They walked up to the man, seeing that he was old and withered, they understood him not to be a threat, as he was once, in his younger days.

"Mister Dutchman," Jack stated.

The man glanced up and exhaled loudly and slowly from his nostrils.

"We have some questions for you," Charlie added.

"Hmm..." Said the reposed man.

"Do you know why we're here?" Jack asked.

"Yes," The Dutchman said, "I knew them all, they were always under my wing. All of them. Everyone."

The Dutchman swallowed and coughed, tears began to form in his eyes.

"You killed them all, didn't you?" Jack said, arbitrarily.

"My little black dog that I thought was dead; turns out I was mistaken. That's what they all say, 'mistakenly mistaken,' like I didn't know, but I knew, I knew those people," the Dutchman said, breathing heavily. He looked into his hands and continued: "I-I... killed them. I should've killed them... But I couldn't." The Dutchman's voice rose from deep in his chest, "I just couldn't..."

"I think he's gone a bit mental, Jack."

"Do you know what happened to your last dodo, mister Dutchman?" Jack asked.

"My, I'm so glad you've asked me that," said the Dutchman, shaking his head as he rolled into the shade.

"I was born in 1620," he informed the Englishmen, "I can tell you everything about dodos, for it has been so long since they were here. But first let me tell you this: I never killed a dodo. These monsters did not exist."

And he gave the two Englishmen a whole school of lies about how there were no dodos and no birds at all:

"There was no such thing as a dodo. The dodo was nothing but a wild creation of the priests, and priests alone."

"It's one of the most spectacular plot twists I have ever seen on film!" Charlie exclaimed.

"That's all fine and well," said Jack, "but why mister Dutchman, why did you dedicate the whole of your being to the sexual violation of others?"

The Dutchman's long thin face scrunches up a little:

"You're a bit old to call me names, my good man," and then, in what might be the greatest understatement in history, "well, perhaps, just perhaps, that is what I was doing."

He smiled and winked.

"But even a sailor like you, with all of your weird knowledge," Jack chortled, "couldn't possibly believe all of that."

"Oh yes," the Dutchman stated, a little more serious now, "I must admit, I do believe everything that I see in here," he pointed to his forehead, "I can see everything."

Jack, of course, being the realist, dismissed the Dutchman's claims and headed back to the ship.

A man of morality, Jack had always been prepared to tell the truth to others. He approached former Midshipman Ben 'Ney,' and flat-out told him that the dodos were real. When he spoke, the big bad Navy SEAL could not help but break down in tears, only to be comforted by Jack, who had to be sure that no one else knew about the deceit.

Meanwhile, Charlie was still pestering the Dutchman, asking him for his real name.

"What's a name, anyway? What's it to me if I never say it?" The Dutchman whined.

"Where'd your surname come from?" Charlie pressed, "maybe we could swap surnames and be friends."

"I have no surname," the Dutchman answered, sadly.

"What?!" Charlie exclaimed.

"I-I don't have a surname..." he repeated.

"Does that mean that you're my cousin and we're gonna be together forever?" Charlie explained.

"It's a good thing," the Dutchman offered, "well, actually it's a bad thing. If I had a surname, then everyone would know who I was, and that I would not be able to keep my ruse a secret from my past."

Charlie was dumbfounded: "But why, Dutchman, why didn't you just say so from the beginning? I could have handled this much better."

"I'm not the most emotional of men, sir, if you hadn't noticed... I like a little mystery."

"I see," Charlie noted, "then why don't you tell me what's so great about your name, like the rest of the world can't?"

"Because it's quite boring, it's nothing but a stupid word that means 'The name of the Dutchman,' you see... The Dutchman, as in, *a* Dutchman... An arrogant, puffed-up, little Dutchman..."

"Well," Charlie said, sarcastically, "you're no longer a Dutchman, you're a Dutchwoman."

"What!?" The Dutchman exclaimed.

Just then, Jack and Ben arrived. Jack turned to Ben and said:

"Yonder stands the Dutchman himself, Ben. Are you going to say hi or something?"

"No, I'm not going to say hi."

"Then what are we waiting for? Let's go talk to him."

They approached, but the Dutchman didn't recognize them.

"Hi," said Jack.

"Oh..." The Dutchman anwsered.

"Hello," said Ben.

"Hello?"

"Hello?"

"I don't understand you, you foolish boy," The Dutchman said, calmly.

"Oh," said Ben, seeming embarrassed:

"That means you want to fight. Don't you get it?"

"I'm not sure I can," The Dutchman laughed.

"Then you're an idiot."

"He said he wasn't a boy!" Jack exclaimed.

"Hear this," the Dutchman said, "you are a foolish boy."

"That's right," Ben agreed.

"But, you are wrong about me," the Dutchman went on, "because I am not a boy at all. I am a man, a great man, but a man nonetheless. I was the captain of *The Dutchman*, a great ship... a pirate ship; The greatest ship in the world!"

"Wait, wait," Ben started, "what are you saying?"

"What I'm saying is, that I am not actually Dutch. I am in fact a Teutonic badman from Denmark, but I grew up in Amsterdam and spent much of my youth sneaking into bars and fighting with beautiful women for their affections... 'What they don't know won't hurt them,' is my motto. So, I decided to make up a name that would get me out of any awkward questions, which, after all, is a basic principle of any respectable government. Thus, the name 'The Dutchman.' This, of course, caught on. Everyone in Amsterdam started using my name. For instance, I used to see a tailor named 'The Dutchman,' and when I saw a hairdresser, a man named 'The Dutchman'... I'm a man of many names."

Suddenly, they had all noticed that a large helicopter was closing in on their location. Soon, a number of hooded figures swiftly slid down cables from the aircraft. They surrounded Jack, Charlie, and the Dutchman, pointing their loaded sub-machine guns at them.

"On your knees, hands behind your heads!"

They did so.

Charlie turned to Ben: "Who are these people?!"

"They're to take you in, and so am I."

"What!?" Jack exclaimed, "I thought we were here for the Dutchman. What is this?!"

"Three birds with two stones, Jack. The Dutchman is not the only threat to world peace present among us," Ben huffed, "since every legal body in the world has failed to enact judgment upon you, me and my UN brothers have chosen to take this task upon our shoulders, for we are aware of not only the hideous exploits of the Dutchman, but also of you and Charlie as well."

"How could you set us up after all the money we gave you!" Cried Charlie, "British. Pound. Sterling!"

"Because that money is no good in a world without justice, or in a world with you roaming free."

"Look, Ben, I understand your emotional desire for world peace, but what I don't quite understand is why in a world of belligerent state actors, why you would chose to fight an unwinnable battle. It's like protesting at the World Cup while Ireland isn't even competing. We are supposed to be smart people, but you'll have to excuse me, since I am not an intellectual."

"This is the organization I can have all my affairs run through. I won't be involved in any wars, or be at the helm of any government," said Ben, "rather, I will be leading the most dedicated peacekeepers from all around the world to do what these state actors, as you call them, refuse to do. And that starts with you three, so-"

"Ben you don't seem the type to operate on an inconsistent logical basis," Charlie interjected, "your ideology is futile because of its inconsistent application to the outside world. This isn't a game. You can't escape responsibility. Instead, the world is relying on you to make the world safe from international conflict, but I don't see you helping to do so. Maybe it's because you know you can't actually do that, so you go against perfectly innocent bystanders like myself, or Jack, or, as far as the law is concerned,—the Dutchman here."

"What did you just say?" Said Ben, quietly.

"That's right, he was *acquitted*. We have the documents," said Charlie, gesturing to Jack.

Jack nodded and, produced the documents in question.

Ben snatched them from his hand and began examining them furiously.

"Anyhow," Charlie continued, "even though in this world you are an extralegal organization, you don't think of yourself in that way. So, you must comply with these laws, whatever that means."

Ben wiped the sweat from his scarred face. He leveled his eyes at them: "Alright," he said, begrudgingly, "but what about you two?"

"Our responsibilities to society are more than we can be burdened with," said Jack, "so, I say, you go fight your cause, and we're good."

Ben watched them leave, one after the other: "For years, I've thought of what I should do once they were caught," he said with a sigh, "now they've slipped from my grasp... God, what I wouldn't do for a Crawdad right now."

Jack & Charlie Become Thuggees. Cap. XIX.

THe hookah was not shaped like a hookah, Charlie noticed. Jack didn't, though. The hookah seemed more like a balloon. Charlie suddenly had an image of what Jack was probably doing. He pictured Jack inside this hookah, his belly throbbing like a black hole in space, swirling in the gas that swirled and churned inside the charcoal funnel.

"Are you sure you want this?" Charlie asked.

"What does it matter?" Jack answered.

Charlie took a deep inhale, then he inhaled again, exhaling in a high whistle. He made this sound over and over again.

The smoke was light and cool, like a soul surfer riding a wave of a hand-dipped bubble wrap, and the taste was a sweet zing in Charlie's mouth.

The hookah party was not the biggest or the smallest party. People had staked their own claim on the floor and on one of the hotel room windowsills.

Charlie watched as the Asian bodyguard, whose name was

Jacques, attempted to perform with a seven-foot-tall couple. It was an obvious ploy to attract the gaze of a gaggle of young girls, but he didn't get the desired effect. The other Asian bodyguard, known as Soames, looked like a large ape in a brown suit, still chewing the head of a cigar.

"Soames, where are you from?" Asked Jack.

"I have an affair with the French!" Soames answered.

"Jeez," Charlie laughed, "how can you stand that cigar?"

The bodyguard continued: "My father is a Frenchman, my brother is a French criminal."

"Nice," Charlie commented.

Jack raised his hands and turned away.

Charlie mimicked him.

Jack put his arm around Charlie and pulled him close:

"You'd do better to get it over with, Charlie."

"I've already decided to kill the bastard, Jack."

"No, you've got to hurt him and he has to go away."

Charlie remained silent, contemplating what he would do:

"I don't understand what you're suggesting," he said, finally, "this is revenge for blowing up my restaurant?"

"It's not a normal revenge. This is a romantic revenge. You hurt him, take his money, and you get revenge on his wife. He gets to live with it."

Charlie stood, knocking over his beer: "I can do both. I can kill him, take his money, and go after her."

Jack touched his shoulder: "You're a smart man."

"So are you," Charlie anwsered.

Charlie finished his drink and poured another.

Jack took a hit off the hookah and then passed it to Charlie. Charlie took a gulp and then offered the hookah to Jack. Jack shrugged and passed the hookah back to Charlie.

Charlie made an O-shape with his lips and blew smoke rings. He passed the hookah to Jack.

The two of them sat in silence for awhile.

"Do you ever think about your ex-wife?" Charlie asked.

Jack nodded: "I try not to, I've done enough violence."

"Yes, you have. Not only have you killed someone, you have made him go away. It's the only reason I can see for his staying alive. That's not a relationship, it's a revenge fantasy."

"Not exactly, mate, the truth is, she made me do it."

"No, she made you who you are."

Jack looked at Charlie and made a slight nod.

"Sorry, mate," Charlie said.

The pair wandered down the carpeted staircase into the lobby. They headed for the end of the bar, where Jacques stood, smoking his last few minutes away.

"Charlie," said Jack, "you look a bit like Jeremy Corbyn. What do you think?"

Jacques choked on his huge cigar. He had to hold the tip of the cigar in one hand, ash in the other. He coughed up a lung of smoke: "Did you know that all cigars start as this?" He held his wrinkled cigar high in the air.

"If you say so, Jacques," said Charlie, "and as long as I don't have to smell the smoke."

Jacques sat back down on the stool and exhaled a cloud of smoke. Jack picked up the key card and stepped inside. The doorman turned to him, and said:

"Jacques would like to see you, sir."

Jack stopped and turned around: "He can wait."

The doorman nodded and turned back to the night's normal clientele.

Jack climbed the stairs. Once inside the room, he scanned the area. It looked like the sort of room where people get arrested and then charged with burglary. There were photos of famous sports stars plastered across the walls, like some woman had thrown away her husband's team pictures. It all seemed so tiresome to Jack. He knew that he had to make sure that he wouldn't get caught. He picked up the TV remote and opened a cabinet beneath the television. He looked inside for a minute. Then, Jack walked out to be greeted once more by Charlie.

"I know what you're going to ask me," Charlie said.

"What's that?"

"I'm not an accountant, you know. I can't audit your money."

"Nice try. Give me your word that it's all real?"

Charlie nodded and gave him the envelope with all the money. He closed the cabinet and stuck out his hand for the envelope. Jack placed the envelope into his hand and Charlie grabbed it, Jack slid the door shut.

Jack picked up his shirt and trousers, he grabbed his jacket and walked outside. He tossed them on top of his other clothes, and then he and Charlie walked down the steps,—the now familiar film of sand being blown in his face,—to find Charlie's motorbike. The low roar of the engine would be a comfort.

Jack walked back to the taxi. Jacques was huddled up, crying in the driver's seat.

Jack took the taxi to the main road. He asked the driver to stop where he would leave his bike. The driver looked at him with sad eyes: "Very sorry, sir..."

"Oh..."

Jack got out of the taxi and chewed on some gum. He had the sense that this was going to be the last time he would ever have to take his taxi back to London.

If only everything could be so simple. Jack sat on his bike and drove out of the town and up to the coast. He turned left and followed the winding road along the coast. The sky was blue, the sea was a deep blue, and the roads were empty. The sea gleamed like a jewel in the morning sun. He pulled up along the coast at a beach. He left his helmet with the keys inside the sand dunes, and then he walked down onto the beach. He lay down on the warm sand and watched the seagulls and the surfers.

After a while, he put his hands behind his head, closed his eyes, and thought of home. The road was empty, and he was all alone, but at least he had Charlie.

Against all odds, it was true,—Jack and Charlie were the first British Thuggees ever. Quite an achievement.

Charlie examined his sash and turban.

"How do I look now?" He asked.

Jack looked at Charlie and said: "Ah, Charlie my friend, you look fabulous!"

Charlie winked and said:

"You look great too, Jack!"

Charlie led Jack to the backroom where the Thuggee ceremony was to be performed, although Charlie did not believe that the ceremony was meant for Jack alone. He even suspected that Jack was invited by the Thugs themselves. Still, they went. A few minutes later, Jack and Charlie were part of the ceremony. It was very straightforward, with the exception of one crucial thing. There was also a young man with a black turban and a black face. This man approached Charlie and said:

"You are now in charge of the Thuggee movement."

Charlie thanked the man, asked him for forgiveness for some terrible things he said about the Thugs, and returned to Jack. Jack looked at him and said: "There will be some changes to the way we do things. Only trouble is that the Thugs don't know anything about the changes. They are very confused by the new situation, which is understandable."

Charlie smiled and said: "I know exactly how you feel, I am also very confused. The only thing I know for sure is that things will change... only later."

"Well, the first order of work is to bring the Thuggees to England; I fancy going back."

"You have to make a plan, Jack, there will be a number of choices you have to make."

"Well I can tell you that the Thugs are not going to change. I was actually surprised by the changes, although, I still hope that things will change."

Charlie laughed and said: "You hope? I am sure you will be surprised again by a surprise."

"Charlie, what kind of surprise are you talking about?"

"Oh I wish I knew, there are a few things I was not aware of."

"I wish you did too. I had no idea I would be a part of the Thuggee movement."

Charlie laughed. He knew that Jack had no clue of what he was talking about, so he laughed to put Jack in a good mood.

"Jack, do you want to talk about something else?"

"No, I want to talk about what I wish for."

Jack smiled. Charlie had some doubts about Jack's ambitions, but he did not really want to discuss that.

"Alright, Jack, that is what I wish for. This is not to say I will have all that I wish for, perhaps some, but many of my wishes have not been fulfilled. I wish I had some more friends. I wish that my father was still alive."

"Well, at least we have the other Thuggees. We're a whole group of associates now. Let's bring the boys back to England so they can spread good ol' Kali's word."

And so they did, a whole plane full of Thuggees arrived in England, flown by Charlie, Jack, and a few others. Everyone laughed and laughed, and Charlie shouted: "The Thuggee people now have been brought to England!"

Everyone shouted: "It's true! It's true!" The atmosphere became near riotous as the Thugges—filled to the brim with excitement and celebration,—began cheering and screaming, some were trying to dance, while others jumped in their seats and yelped loudly. The whole thing was quite fantastical and teeming with color and enthusiasm. Some people even started singing "The Thuggee Song." It went like this:

Thuggee people are the best people!
I bet you want to take one of my friends!
I bet you want to take one of my friends!
There is no way that you can get one of my friends!
You will never get one of my friends, I don't think so!
I am sure that you will never get one of my friends!
You will never get one of my friends!
Thuggee people are the best people!
I bet you want to take one of my friends!

Everyone started laughing. The Thugs were very confused. Jack looked at Charlie and said: "Well the Thuggee movement is now in England, I guess that is a good thing."

Charlie nodded. It was time to get to work. Their first victim was a man by the name of Tunny Buck. He had killed around thirty Thugs in Etawah. They buried him under some earth in Kensington. They had never seen a man as big as Tunny, he was extremely strong and could lift many tons of earth.

They had built a stone pyramid in the ground, which was slowly getting bigger and bigger. The first victim in England did not really know anything about the Thuggee movement, he thought that the Thugs were a crazy cult that caused all the disasters in the world. He did not know about the statues of the Goddess Kali. Jack and Charlie attacked him in the middle of the night and started hitting him on his head. They also gave him some other chemical concoctions. Tunny was tied up, and he was screaming in pain. He yelled at the Thugs, Jack and Charlie attacked him with a lot of kicks and punches. Tunny had to admit that Jack and Charlie were the greatest fighters in the whole world.

"Oh Jack, that is so cool! Oh Jack! Did you really hear what he said?" Charlie yelled to Jack.

Charlie was very proud. He shanked Tunny again.

"Yeah Charlie I heard it, I heard him," Jack smiled.

"We were kind of worried," Charlie said, "but we are going to kill you all, even the one who said we were the best!"

Tunny started crying and begging:

"Oh please, please! Do not do it, please don't do it."

But they would not listen, and instead they took his gold, and finally kicked and killed him and left him in the dirt. The Thugs then got some beds and slept.

They woke up and cleaned themselves up. After breakfast they continued their journey. They had never walked that much. Now they were in France. They all hid in a cave and started using pottery for their conjuring tricks, to make themselves smell some herbs, which made them hallucinate.

Jack was playing with the shadows and laughing at everything. The Thugs were getting tired, and had a big headache, so

they decided to stay in the cave and rest. They had a drink of wine to get some sleep.

Jack looked at Charlie.

"You know Jack, we can see Kali."

"I can't believe it, Charlie."

"We will make ourselves real and go to Kali. We will knock on Kali's door and show her what we have learned. She will like us and let us come into her temple. She will be happy that we can help her."

The next day they woke up and did their chores for the goddess Kali. The Thugs took all kinds of drugs and they could not feel anything. But Charlie could. He felt it. Kali was there, and she made them real.

"I can't believe it, mate," said Jack, "How could two blokes from England be real? How, Charlie?"

"I don't know, Jack."

Then they left, they were gone.

The Thugs woke up, they could not find Jack and Charlie. They looked for Jack and Charlie for a long time. The Thugs searched all over the mountain, and they could not find Jack and Charlie anywhere. They cried and screamed for Jack and Charlie. They looked for them in the woods, in the rocks, and in the mountains again. But the two were long gone, now on their way to Liverpool, singing a happy song:

Life, love and nature all make the sky shine bright.
With the beauty of the mountain,
The flowers and the animals.
Make life a joy, not a curse,
Life is a wonderful, loving thing.
You do not have to take drugs or drink,
You can just enjoy yourself, and live your life.
If you want to make love to life and love, make love.
Make love to the love, make love to the sky,
The birds and the trees.
It is all real, beautiful, and loving.
Make love to nature, make love to the sky!

Jack and Charlie sauntered into a pub as though they owned it and Jack instantly struck a nerve with the quiet, hardened figure at the bar.

"What the hell are you doing here?" The portly man spat at Jack, rage clearly showing in his bulging eyes and surprisingly muscular arms.

"I'm in need of a proper drink and someone to talk to, so I thought I'd buy you a drink."

"I don't care for your fuckin' piddly shit, runt!" Another man growled, lifting a blunt knuckle in a nasty blow to Jack's nose.

Jack reeled back from the blow and looked around in shock before Charlie swiftly hit the portly man with a punch to his broad shoulders.

"You touched me!" Jack growled angrily and Charlie scowled but did nothing as the portly man staggered back in shock, the drink in his hand spilling all over the floor.

Jack shook the pain from his cheek and then turned to see Charlie slapping the portly man in the face with a powerful left hook to the back of the head. The man doubled over and fell into the table behind him, knocking the few bottles of beer to the floor as he crashed into the wooden surface.

Charlie ran around the pub followed closely by Jack, looking around desperately for a man in a fancy shirt, but the moment they saw one in the corner they charged to his side.

"Get him!" Jack ordered and the bartender dashed to the man, lifting him off the floor as Charlie dealt him a vicious punch to the face.

The man fell backwards and rolled several times, before finally slamming into the back of a wooden chair.

Charlie growled angrily as Jack and the bartender held the man down.

"When's he getting his ass kicked?" Charlie asked, staring into the man's bloodied face, "I could do this a lot better."

"I'm pretty sure he's not complaining," Jack said, as he grabbed the man's shirt and yanked him towards the door.

Charlie grinned and pulled the man to his feet, making sure he was looking at him and then kneed him hard in the stomach, saying: "Fuck off, boy."

The barman picked up the portly man, grabbed the long, dusty jacket the man was wearing and pulled him outside. The door closed behind them and Jack glanced towards Charlie:

"We'll get the other guy in a bit."

Jack walked to the other man and stuck his thumb in his shirt pocket, seeing Charlie grin at him over the other man's shoulder.

"What's your problem with this guy?" Jack asked, handing Charlie the shirt with a grin and a wink, "someone looks like they could do a hell of a lot better."

"I've got plenty of them in my closet, but they're all pudgy," Charlie winked at Jack, seeing him hesitate before throwing the shirt at the man. Jack watched as the man sat on the cold, dusty ground and stared at the shirt, which he struggled to get off, before he pushed it away and shuffled towards the door: "Shame to ruin such a nice shirt. Wouldn't look right without it."

Jack & Charlie go to the Moon. Cap. XX.

JAck was reclining in his understudy, clutching his cigar box and listening to loud music from his over-sized subwoofers.

Charlie—taking note of this ruckus—headed down to inquire as to what Jack was listening to.

"Listening to that fellow again, Jack? What was his name?.."

"Why, Charlie-boy, it's Trappanggino, the greatest musician alive."

"I don't know, Jack, sounds like silly hip-hop."

Jack lowered the volume:

"Let me tell you about Trappanggino."

"Wait," Charlie interrupted, "that fellow that earnestly believes that the moon is made out of cheese? Honestly, Jack, I think you only like him because you found his music in a box."

Jack lit his cigar and then began explaining:

"Not only is the man a genius, he's a larcenist too. He was

born in a small town in the fall of 1649. Did you know that they called him 'Trappanggino' because he stole all the cows from the neighbor who sent him as a child to the general store? Well, that, and because of his lack of manners, which he obviously inherited from his parents, who were both peasants.

He left home at the age of thirteen to go into the general trade, but then began performing, and he had a great talent for it. But, as anyone could tell you, a great talent for singing and dancing only goes so far when all a man is good for is fiddling, you have to make a living somehow. Now, one day, he realized that he could rap, and he's been great at it ever since, selling himself to anyone who'll listen."

Charlie lit his own cigar:

"Uh, Jack, what kind of rap is he singing?"

Jack looked over at him and said:

"Think of it as a lamentation for the odd nature of life. Of course, Trappanggino tries to maintain the exaggerated stereotype of an enlightened, self-educated, peasant, but underneath that we see a man who is constantly at odds with himself and others, and whose own inner demons prevent him from reaching his true potential."

Charlie laughed: "That sounds like rap to me."

Jack took out some money from his cigar box and continued: "The themes in the music include: Wildlife, fantasy, native American mythology, spirituals, and celebration of life... but more on the man himself: The small town he was born in was in the now long gone country of Gogland, which was home to a large population of poets, writers, entertainers and eccentrics. Trappanggino was more of a poet than anything else, but his mother, once she found out what he was doing, was disgusted, and her objections were widely regarded by the community.

For the first twenty years of his life he struggled as a lowly individual. In 1673, at a party, he overheard the teacher of a local school complaining that there was a lack of verses about cheese, and so Trappanggino went off to write some in his normal style, but then his mother revealed her contempt for him and in-

sulted him. A teacher at the party then gave Trappanggino the poem he'd been working on. Trappanggino didn't want to take it, because it was incomplete, and so he went back home to pick up his pens and ink and continue work on it. He wasn't there for long, before his mother and sister found him, and nearly beat him to death. The teacher, furious at what had happened, supposedly began cursing the devil, and the first verse Trappanggino wrote was:

They don't know I'm coming;
They're both set on love,
That they were eating when I came."

Jack went on reciting all of the verses, memorized and preformed in an almost solemn, religious, tone.

"What's all this about cheese, though?"

"Well, Charlie, remember how I was saying that people didn't understand Trappanggino's music? That's why. He explains that it's true that the people are fools. He knew about the true nature of cheese, and told the people, and yet they all ate it anyway. So, in the end, he sings that he hates them all and wishes them an eternity of pain, but then, because he loves his mother, even though she hates him,—he walks away.

He ran away from the island, first to the Americas, then to the mystical East. The final verse is him attempting to reach the modern man, and he is determined that he'll become a famous poet. He says that if he was "a fool," he'll be a blessed fool, but that happiness he cannot ever taste. His music might be boastful at times, but, it is always at least tinged with melancholy."

"How well known is he, Jack?"

"Well, he once sang to an Emperor."

"Which emperor?"

"The Emperor of India."

"India?"

"Yes, that's why Trappanggino went there."

"Did he know about all the sages?"

"Well, actually, he wasn't so much interested in them as a culture, as he was in their music. But he spent a good amount

of time at their temples, listening to their chanting, and he picked up a thing or two. Also, he knew that one of the sages in the temple could turn into a huge elephant."

"Yeah? How did he know that?"

"Well, I'm glad you asked."

"Oh yeah?"

"No, I'm not going to tell you."

"Yes, I know."

"Yeah, anyway, Trappanggino lives in Japan now, and is supposedly the most famous hermit there. He likes listening to people talk and play games. He makes things out of his fingernails and calls them 'gold.' "

"How does he do that?"

"It's just a variation of the shamisen."

"A shamisen?"

"Exactly, a shamisen is a stringed instrument like a guitar. But Trappanggino's fingernails are cut into thin pieces, and he puts them on the string without putting any skin on his fingers. Then he plays the shamisen, and plays it so it sounds like the fingerings are in his fingernail."

"What the fuck."

"I know, right?"

A few weeks passed, they had decided to go to a Trappanggino concert, given that he was going on tour through Europe. The attendees numbered to about 500. After the concert the pair snuck their way into the backstage, where they saw him.

Trappanggino was seated on a large couch with a coffee table completely covered in unopened water bottles before him. He appeared to be dressed in something resembling the robes of a judge or zen monk, the robe was colored red and underneath he wore a white shirt with a flat double collar. His hairline was clearly receded, however, he had long gray dreadlocks which appeared fused, and as if they were embalmed. His goatee was covered in patches of white hairs and a gray mustache dangled over his, somewhat jutted, jaw. His eyes were mismatched, with one always appearing half closed and discolored to a shade of Prus-

sian Blue. His nose was abnormally proportioned for a man of African descent, and appeared vaguely aquiline, though flatter at the upper bridge whereupon were rested his rimless jar-like eyeglasses.

He was plucking on his white bass guitar, which was tarnished and splotched with color, a faded kanji, something from a colonial era holocaust, and a swastika on its side. An intensely proud smile on his face, he was surrounded by a number of amoral bandit goons who looked over and snickered every time he stopped playing. He seemed to be singing in his performance, he looked over at Jack and Charlie, smiled warmly, and then said:

"Asaba, my niggas, how much money ya'll think it would take to get yo' bitches?"

He continued to play his bass with a vigor and emotion that belied the workmanship of the instrument. He leaned forward to look Charlie in the eyes and snarled:

"Yo bitches need fuckin' tonics, come down to the Arab side of town tomorrow at five, and see how good it will be."

Jack came forward and shook his hand warmly:

"I'm so glad to meet you, sir. I read that you were supposed to be the inspiration for the Shaolin Gorilla Bikers."

"Nah, that was just funny. But, I was fat, so I wasn't much good at fighting anyways. Check this out though, you ever look into the 'rain dance?' Like, watch how the trees sway, and then a little wind comes and blows the leaves around, and then the leaves get all blurry, and then the trees get hunched and they start to shuffle back and forth? Nigga, that's my shit... When I was living among the Shoshone, we used to pray to the moonlight, and when the moon would peek over the horizon, we'd start to dance to get the light to hit our eyes so we could make out the stars, like a bunch of gutter lunatics... Niggas on the mountain can't dance... fuck y'all mountain niggas, I ain't fuck wit' ya', except for those fuckin' niggas off the board. Nigga, I really like you; come on."

Jack and Charlie followed Trappanggino to a windowless

compartment, in which the two laid on his bunk. Trappanggino continued:

"I let niggas on the internet watch my shit, so you guys can learn my shit. What did you want to learn?"

Jack said that he greatly enjoyed his lyricism.

Trappanggino looked at Charlie and said:

"What you doin' nigga?"

Charlie said that he wanted to learn from Trappanggino how to play guitar, which seemed to catch Trappanggino off guard: "Fuckin' what?"

"I like your style of playing, so I thought you could teach me," Charlie added, after a brief pause.

Trappanggino laughed:

"Nigga do I look like a guitar teacher? Shit, my bass was beat up, so I kinda' don't have to have it tuned, I just like to bang it on the table a lot. How 'bout you learn somethin' else?"

Jack thought about this for a moment, and then said:

"I'm really interested in how to write good music."

Trappanggino turned to Jack and said:

"What did you think I played before I played bass?"

"I don't know," Jack replied.

Trappanggino turned to Charlie and said:

"What you doin', nigga?"

"I'm just a loser from the slums," Charlie answered.

Trappanggino turned to Jack and said:

"Fuckin' what?"

"He's from Liverpool," Jack said, "can't get him down south."

Trappanggino said to Jack:

"You know about the moon, right nigga? You know what I learned when I was with the Snohomish? I learned the moon is made out of fuckin' cheese, my nigga. You guys been gettin' a bit cheese on the brain?"

Trappanggino then motioned to his head, and said:

"Cheese head, cheese head..."

Jack looked at Trappanggino and said:

"Well, it seems to me that if the moon is made out of cheese, then maybe it is a space station."

"That's right nigga, it's a space station... who told you that?"

"Some balding, fat, wanna-be rock-n-roll star," Jack answered.

Trappanggino and Jack turned to Charlie, who had begun to draw: "What you doin' nigga?" Trappanggino said to him.

"I'm just sketching."

"That's fuckin' cool, nigga. What you doin'?"

"I'm a sculptor, I'm trying to figure out how to melt cheese into diamonds and turn them into earrings."

"Fuck you, nigga. What's your job for real?"

Jack and Charlie glanced at each other.

"We're pimps, among other things," Charlie said, slowly.

Trappanggino laughed and said: "Niggas, listen here, I don't like y'all talking like that, especially you, white boy. Do you even know what you're talkin' about?

"Yes," said Charlie, "we do know what we're talkin' about."

Trappanggino looked at him for a moment, and then said:

"Yeah, well, what do you know about this? Don't you know about the space station?"

Jack smiled and said: "Look, Trappanggino, this is crazy. Let's do it my way, okay?"

Trappanggino smiled and replied: "Okay, my nigga, you should be smart enough to know what to do."

Jack and Charlie accompanied Trappanggino to his London flat under the pretense of exchanging pimping techniques. Trappanggino, however, kept interjecting his ideas about the moon into the topic in the most unusual ways possible.

"I'm tellin' you niggas, they putting moon bitches up in that cheese station... It's a lunar brothel, my nigga..."

Charlie tried to return to the topic at hand but was interrupted by Trappanggino:

"I don't eat cheese, I don't see cheese, I don't mess with it, how you think I live so long, nigga?"

He beat his chest three times and entered a coughing fit, and then returned to the discourse as if nothing had happened:

"They put cheese in everything these days, that's why peoples is so small, smaller than they used to be..."

Jack passed a dubiously rolled marijuana cigarette to Trappanggino and began asking him about politics:

"Say mister 'Gino, what is your opinion on the political unrest in the North Caucasus between the Moscovite Caliphate and the Scythian Confederation? And how do you suppose the Aztec expansion into the Near-East will affect these things?"

Trappanggino took a long toke off the marijuana and held it in his mouth for a moment before saying:

"That's a tough question, but what can I tell ya'? They's so many terrorists all over the place. They should be called 'Niggeristan.' The nigga in question, *Zack Savage*, he's the president of Niggeristan, he's just a young motherfucker trying to make a name for himself. He has no plans to take over the galaxy, you know. He's just a nigga who talks big but is no threat. You understand me? A nigga like that doesn't got any pull. Niggeristan is just another planet of Venus, and they's plenty of tasty planets, if I might be so bold as to say so."

"Please, let's keep all political discussions relegated to one planet at a time, Mr. 'Gino," Charlie said, in an almost insultingly ironic tone.

"Fuck, nigga, really? Don't you know 'bout them eel niggas in space? Shit, okay. Well, for one thing, the Scythian Confederation is definitely headed for war with the Moscovite Caliphate, because the Moscovite Caliphate, in their victory game, has said that they's going to continue in their march on the South of the Avaristan. Second of all, the Aztec expansion to the Near-East means that most of the Zanshin religion's population has been wiped out. And thirdly, at the peak of the Aztec expansion they hit a time which they call the 'Line of Demarcation.' They was further South and lost four warships in the space of twelve hours. The Aztecs are notorious for snipin' dignitaries and high ranking officials 'cross the world."

"The Zanishin religion?" Jack whispered to Charlie.

"The Zanshin religion," said Charlie, "is a faith spread from Japan to the Near-East that worships dragon gods."

"Anyway," the rapper continued, "I'm not partial to any side here. All I want is to be left to my own musical devices, and then I'm going to retire to the trailer park. I have no plans to overthrow any political systems or govern the galaxy." Trappanggino continued to talk about how the Moscovite Caliphate and the Macronesian Republic were going to go to war, saying that the Caliphate was going to come to Macronesia's aid after they had established their ruling city in Nagasaki, and, finally, the conversation ended with Trappanggino having more to say about the topic than he had words to say.

He clapped his hands, spun around in his chair, and exclaimed: "Damn!" And pointed to a statue of Budokon-esque mascot named "Voldemagno." It was an animated mask with a can and sunglasses that opened and closed when you spoke, and only blinked in and out, allowing the listener to open up with other words.

"This isn't just anybody, is it?" Charlie asked.

"No, it's not," Trappanggino said, "this is named the 'Nigger-Saurus.' That nigga racist, right? Tell me you're not racist."

Jack and Charlie left confused, but Jack was still quite elated that he had met his favorite musician.

They passed by *that* part of London, and heard many strange noises there.

"It's getting late Jack, where are we off to now?"

"We're going to to Italy Charlie"

"Italy? You mean Darked Italia?"

"Why yes Charlie, the former seat of the Roman Empire, the capital of the known world, or at least it once was."

"I know what Rome is Jack," he paused and rubbed his palms together, "so why are we off to Italy then? Its quite late and we have become intoxicated on various substances, and the words of a madman."

They debated for a moment but ultimately decided to head down to Italy, or "Darked Italia" as it had come to be known af-

ter the fall of the Roman Empire. What this name actually signified was not known to many, it was an almost vestigial race-memory, given that the Italian peninsula had become a hermit kingdom of sorts. Jack and Charlie were set to find out more.

They arrived in the city of Perugia, what they assumed to be the Italian version of London. The thing that had struck Jack the most about their surroundings was that there were no people, not a single living soul. The streets were decorated in flames, half of the buildings burnt to the ground. A post-apocalyptic vignette reminiscent of the movies they had seen the week before, albeit, with more somber and desolate flourishes.

Jack and Charlie kept walking to the top of a hill, when they realized that they had to cross a large lake that surrounded the city, a lake that was no longer full of water. Part of the lake had been turned into a lagoon, as you'd expect to see in a sub-aquatic horror movie.

The current of the lagoon now sucked visitors into its depths. Jack and Charlie stood on the bank, observing the eerie darkness of the lagoon. As the moon rose, it set on the lake, casting a strange light, like the moon had fallen in love with it.

Jack and Charlie looked upon it with wonder and feint fear.

"Who has placed this sight before me?" Jack wondered, "I cannot fail to behold what appears to be the emblem of death in the prime of this era. Yet, when death does fall, it most certainly does so in the form of a white, reeking, humanoid, draped in the unspeakable apparition of mortality. The abomination, this dark beauty hungrily drinks in the souls of those it befalls, greedily stealing what precious good it can find, before rising with the sunrise and plunging it back into the dead."

"My friend," said Charlie, "you have no idea. Like what you have seen, our fear is due to the terrible truth that is lurking in the lake, in the forest, and wherever we have traveled thus far. To think I will awake from this dream. There are horrors in this world that must never be known, for our very existences are built on the bones of the dead."

Jack laughed softly as they stood on the grassy bank over-

looking the lake. They kept walking and arrived at the Italian city known as Remedello. They stared up at the heights, gazing at the light that seemed to emanate from the sea. They looked into the sky but saw no stars, no sky at all, only the darkness of the sea and the darkness of the clouds above.

"You know," said Jack, "for the most part, I do not understand this world, and this reality is not for me to comprehend."

To his surprise the wind seemed to pick up and blow in their direction. The wind brought a light breeze that freshened up the very nature of the surrounding forest and made the trees and vines sway slightly. Jack and Charlie were left wondering: How could a breeze bring the air of life to a forest? Is this real? Is this just a hallucination, a dream?

Jack was in full disagreement and took a deep breath as he marveled at the beauty of his surroundings. Charlie did not see the sights that Jack had seen, and considered them lost, except for the rocks in the ground, which he believed were rocks, only the reality was that they had once been the flesh of those who had lived in the area, but as a forest grew up around them, those small rocks slowly became a new forest, or perhaps the forest had replaced the tiny stones, which had been the life of a new reality, as it is with all of life.

They stood there, awestruck, as they decided once and for all to make their way to the moon, known as "Killer Moon."

"But how?" Asked Jack.

"Remember that time we went to China, Jack? And that parable about the reflection of the moon in a lake, that was told to us by a vagrant scholar?"

"Bloody brilliant Charlie! We'll just walk into the reflection of the moon! Just like that, like the parable!"

They walked right into the reflection, and after a confusing and unusual moment,—they were really there, on the surface of the moon. As their feet touched the ground, they felt their shoes sink, just a bit. They looked down at the ground and saw a churning mass of what could only be described as an amalgamation of various cheeses.

"You see Charlie! Trappanggino was right, the moon is made of cheese! Good old British Cheddar, from the town of Cheddar."

"But why, Jack? Why do you think this is?"

"There's no bacteria or air in space charlie, it makes sense to put cheese in space, it can last forever!"

They had arrived in the land of the demented, for who could ever imagine the enormity of horror and corruption that awaited them as they went to the moon and beyond? Who could comprehend the unbelievable joy and happiness that would follow upon their return, and who could possibly comprehend the fears and nightmares that would haunt their waking minds upon returning to their abode on Earth?

Jack walked ahead of Charlie. As he looked over his shoulder, he saw a cheesy hillside and motioned for Charlie to follow him, then he rushed into the bottom of the hill, punching and kicking his way through the cheese, and then they beheld it.

It was a city, a huge, multilayered metropolis of cheese, and Charlie realized with a shock of realization that the other cheese was not a dream. It was a city created by cheese, and they were in cheese land, a land of sweet bland cheese that did not taste good. They were frozen in time, frozen, as if the universe had stopped, frozen, as if they were the only two inhabitants of the city. For just a moment, they were frozen like a deer in the headlights, with a haunting sense of impending doom and the knowledge that they were going to die.

And then, miraculously, they began to move. It was a strange feeling, as if they were floating. They saw the city's inhabitants, most of them appeared to be females. They inhabitants were humanoids, but they were all red-skinned and many wore the ubiquitous red and black smocks that said: "The Cheese People."

There were different themes, for instance, some were completely naked, while others wore a full body fish skin suit that included chest and waist compartments, much like an astronaut would wear, as well as red high tops that were always wide and low and totally covered by a long red tie.

Some ladies wore what appeared to be black fuzzy ski-hats with a pom-pom on top. One could see nothing of their face, they were constantly talking, they said things that shocked and frightened the two, as they walked past, and as they watched the cheese-heads stroll back and forth, they decided that they were not too afraid of these creatures.

The inhabitants had many eyes, and instead of hair, they had various sizes and shapes of cheese, as if they had just stepped out of one of their pictures of cheese caves, much like pictorial art can be done by the desert dwellers.

Jack and Charlie were astonished, and then, Charlie remembered: "This isn't a city, Jack," he said in a voice that teetered between awe and jealousy, "this is a city-sized brothel."

"I can answer that," came a feint reply.

They turned and saw what could only be describes as a human-sized pillar of spectral light before them:

"You see, before a person from Zambia enters their heaven, they must first live among the stars for a thousand years. Some of them, like myself, wish to engage in carnal pleasures, and the moon-pimps provide that service to us."

"And where are these moon-pimps?" Charlie inquired.

"They reside in this small black stone edifice. It resembles a castle, as in the days of yore, before the ignorant colonists of old built skyscrapers. It stands as a relic to the time when people built gargoyles on their walls."

"I'm disturbed," said Charlie, "I'm disturbed by how the hell did they build something this big, and I'm disturbed by how the they even found some Earth-men who want to buy or sell."

"Now, now, now," said a red man in red pajamas, "don't be alarmed; these are mighty fine looking women indeed."

"You don't say?" Said Charlie.

"Now, now, now, listen, I can take you to these pimps. Follow me."

"Thank you," said Charlie, "thank you, thank you."

The cheese-man led them to a spiral stone staircase. It led to

a half-door that was usually closed. It was opened by a pinkish milk-pale woman:

"Hello," she said in a sweet, rotund, voice, "come in."

Jack and Charlie entered the castle and were astonished by the sight. There were tiny women in various stages of undress, by turns, topless, in lingerie, and so on. They were similar in appearance to some of the moon-whores they had seen, but there was one quality, a quality that Jack noticed right away, one that made them all look completely different. Most of them had light yellow eyes that glowed a pale gold, as if the light from the stone-light that illuminated their castle was strong enough to give off light, as if they were a thousand years old. The light seemed to come from a pair of eyes that protruded from the strange creatures' necks, as if they were two dragon heads.

Two men, arrayed in full body armor after the fashion of some sort of wrestling show, were engaged in wrestling on the floor. Both were almost as tall as the floor they were standing on. They seemed to always be staring at each other. Their names were, oddly, Billy and Bob.

They both noticed the two men walk in:

"It's rare for us to receive living human guests, especially ones that are not from Zambia. Tell us, what can we do for you?"

Jack and Charlie drew their guns and pointed them at the moon-men. They fired, but the bullets bounced off the armor. The two men charged at Jack and Charlie, who started shooting again, trying to make the two men falter, but the bullets were hitting them straight in the chest.

"The bullets do not seem to work on these men..." said Jack, "unfortunately."

"Yeah, so we kill them with our hands and feet," said Charlie, who sent Billy crashing into a desk with a spinning back kick. Bob threw a kick of his own at Charlie, who staggered away and then threw a punch at Jack, who caught his arm and put him into an arm-bar, and then garroted him. Billy screamed in horror, and, turning away from Jack, grabbed a spear and

plunged it into Jack's shoulder. Charlie took the chance to grab a sword off the desk and slash Bob across the neck.

A lot of blood splattered on the walls.

Charlie rushed to Jack's side:

"You alright there?"

Jack opened his eyes:

"I'm just stunned, frankly, but I'm alright, thank you."

"No, thank you, Jack. Thanks to you we've just expanded our business to the moon, to cheese pussy. Speaking of which, you want to take a few samples?"

"Of course," came the reply. They rounded up the best cheese whores they could find and started fucking them. They fucked them hard, with their hands gripping their bellies, and ripping into their throats and biting deep into their necks. Jack got a taste of the cheese and said:

"I've never tasted anything like this."

The women screamed in agony and pleasure as their tongues swirled around Charlie's cock, their spines bending backwards, while their tongues went deeper and deeper into Jack's mouth.

When they were done, they made their way back to London.

After spending a short time adjusting themselves to life back on the Earth, they went to Trappanggino's flat.

The rapper welcomed them:

"Good to see you niggas again! You niggas ever been to the village, nah? Da' village that da' Arabs lives in, nah? Da' one da' sun shines on?"

"Never mind that, Trappanggino," said Jack, "listen, man, you were right about the moon, it's made of cheese, and there are whores there."

Trappanggino looked at them blankly:

"Nigga, I know... I know you went there and raped all those beautiful cheese whores..."

Charlie looked at Trappanggino incredulously:

"Trappangino, how did you know?"

"Nigga, I been knowin' you'd do that shit. I ain't never seen no cheese whores before, but I knew you was gonna come up there and do it."

Jack rubbed his face:

"We manage them now. We're the greatest pimps since Tyson and Mike,—no joke."

Trappanggino shrugged:

"If you say so."

The three of them turned to face the sunset. The sun was setting, the skyscrapers and factories were disappearing, while the clouds were beginning to form.

Trappangino smiled, and then from his lips sprang a poem:

"We came to the moon like tyrants,
Dropped out of the sky like some egg-like shit,
To conquer us in our petty base fantasies,
Before we knew we were in danger.
And we flew like racists,
On a mad murderous quest,
To take the world back to its soil.
But now we've been killed like tyrants,
In the blood of our consciences.
And for the last time, we fly like racists,
Out into the bloody dusk,
When not a soul pays us any attention,
As we fly over our withered land,
And fly into our petty, insane, hatred.
As we fly in the pale moonlight,
Where there are no cheeseburgers and no people,
And no crops, and the river flows thick,
And there is no boat,
And the leaves of the trees are melting.
And the ice has fallen on the ground,
Like a double grave where the bubbling cauldron lies low.
Where there are no cheeseburgers, and no people.
Where a river runs cold, where there are no people."

Jack & Charlie Engage in a Correspondance. Cap. XXI.

Dear Jack.

Hola mi amigo! I have received your email and I thank you for your affectionate wishes. My mother's birthday was truly one for the books. The celebrations began on the 8th when we had a family meal in which we ate, played, sang, talked, and laughed, and I did all that I could to please.

On the 9th we went to the Pacha village and spent the whole day there. I am talking about a tourist trap in which a tour guide dresses up in a Pacha costume and will show you around. At least we got to see the village, which I saw a while back on "Apocalypse Now," which caused me to declare: "I shall never watch that movie again!" Welp, evidently, I've changed my mind.

On the 10th we had a big party in which we also had the honor of having the esteemed and accomplished British-Bosnian journalist David Marshall come to the party. He is now in Oxford. Everyone enjoyed his stories of his family's past.

The next day, the 11th, we went to two birthday parties—one in the morning and one in the afternoon—at opposite ends of the city. There were some celebrations in between, but I do not recall what they were.

Then, on the 12th we left for the vacation resort of Batumi where we met all my mother's friends, who included one of her students and her father-in-law. That evening we had a birthday dinner and I wore the shirt that my mother had given me. At that moment I felt as if I were home.

On the 13th we visited the palace of the Republic of Adjara in which the President of Georgia lives. We saw his private residences, the offices, his art collection, and his private quarters, which were very spectacular, and then we saw his books, and he was kind enough to give and sign some of them for me.

We then had a private lunch with the President and his wife. I cannot lie, my mouth is agape in shock at the amount of gold and jewelry that the President has,—I never thought that peo-

ple lived this well. But it was his conversation that made me the happiest, because he spoke English flawlessly, with a flawless Ionian accent. I felt as if I were in heaven.

We then went to Baku, Azerbaijan. There was the huge Baku Tower and it had a long tunnel with an opening at the top. The tunnel was inside an enormous tank, and at the other end of the tunnel was the Baku Tower. The tank was full of champagne and we took pictures.

We then had a visit to a castle in which all of the doors and windows were made of solid gold. There were many magnificently dressed people there. One of them had on a suit made entirely of bracelets.

On the 14th I went to Tbilisi to visit the Gori Fortress, and this is where I had to go to the bathroom and there was no toilet paper.

We then flew to Sochi, Russia, which was like going into a private zodiac boat, with its own flight attendant.

This past Friday our flight was delayed and we were forced to sleep on the floor of the airplane. I saw people talking with my mother, trying to console her; this really is difficult. We landed safely, though. I just arrived at a very nice hotel. Please, let me know how you are doing.

Warmly,

—Charlie.

Dearest Charlie,

This is a long note, but my sympathies are with you, my good friend. I hope you can make a go of it for the time being. My word to you, Charlie, is: KABLAM!!! Anyway, me, I've been busy. Last night I was preparing for the opening of a banquet I was invited to at the University. It was the "Foreign Relations Symposium," so there was lots of booze and the grub wasn't too bad. Afterwards, I went out for a stroll. I managed to get my first beers of the evening from a gang of hooligans, then I heard a voice that I had never heard before, it was some white girl with a bit of an Oriental flair talking:

"Hey, friend, how you doin'? What's up, man? I'm from Alabama, and that means I'm racist. Wait a second, nigger, what's that? You've got the wrong colored folks around here? Man, and it's really nice here."

Ahh, a simple sounding woman. Anyway, we went to a pub and got another beer. The girl said: "I wanna fuck you!" This was definitely odd, but I wasn't about to complain. So we went to her place and I had to talk a little loudly to let her know that I was at least partially crazy. I was so disgusted with this girl that I think I might have even converted her to Humanism. Yes, that's right, I said:

"Well, my views on the way in which humans ought to operate is called 'Humanism.' I happen to believe that if you wish to be civilized, the best thing to do is to put aside your beliefs in favor of theirs."

She seemed quite impressed with me. I fucked her for about an hour, she said I was the best lay she'd ever had, so the cunt's opinion counted for something. Afterwards, we walked down to a pond by the river, and she said:

"See, this is where we met last time we were here."

So, we're walking around the pond, and we start talking. I was wearing a turban and a mask and glasses, and it was twilight. Suddenly, the girl looked directly at me and said:

"You know, there's no goddamn way that I'm giving you a ride home."

So I walked away, whistling a merry tune. Anyway, let me know what you see in Russia,—God bless you! The selfsame alcohol that does little good for Charlie, also makes him hard to kill!

I remain your eternal servant,

—Jack.

My man, Jack,

I really need to thank you. I have not been so distracted, I was able to solve my troubles and get back on track to the other side. Now, I'm here on the home stretch. Tell your wife that I

hope she's getting some rest and is taking it easy. It seems the home front is right back to normal. Tell her about the beauty of the Slavs. Tell her about the Polacks and the Ukrainians. Anyway, this time I'm taking a longer route back home so that I can stop by Munich on the way.

As for today I'm in Moscow and my mother has been having a couple of drinks with me this afternoon. Last night we were in a nightclub that was selling whiskey, beer, vodka, and brandy. I'm not an alcoholic by any means, but I'm becoming one. I am especially fond of their brandy, I have no idea how it's produced, but I have it all the time. They sell it in little bottle-like containers with handles, but they also sell it by the shot. It comes in either "red" or "white." I have tried it both ways, it tastes like cough syrup with a little water added. I have never been a fan of hard liquor, but, by God, I like this stuff.

I have also come to the realization that my mother is probably going to stay in Moscow, and I'm not sure I'm kidding! And while she loves the sightseeing, she also very much enjoys the prayers in the mosques. She walks around saying, "Allah" and "Makhdum," at the tops of her lungs. If I didn't know better, I'd swear she was begging for her ass to be slit open. I don't really attend the prayers though—I'm a Christian man—instead, I take the opportunity to fuck some beautiful Russian lasses.

Today I spent the day with a young lady named Evelyn, she's a typical Russian, she was born and raised in Russia, but she's ethnically a mix of several other groups. She claims to be half Chinese and half Polish. At any rate, I never know if she's telling the truth. The only thing that I can be sure of is that she's a whore.

But, tell me, how goes the gardening? Do the leaves really rot like that? I mean, I understand that fruits and vegetables and whatnot have a shorter lifespan than a tree, but come on!
Best wishes,

—Charlie.

Dearest Charlie,

I am so glad to hear that your mother has had a good time. Although I wasn't there for it, I am very glad that it turned out so well. I'm always happy to hear that a woman has seen the beauty and value of what is called the divine, but I really think that if you'll give it a little thought, the religious element can actually be the most fulfilling. It's really what creates happiness. There's a whole world out there with spirituality, and it's something that I have to think about when I get home. I suppose that if you will give it a lot of thought, I may have some ideas for you, but I'm not holding my breath. I will give you a call in the morning and let you know what we're doing today.

It would be so great if you could take a peep at my garden. I'm starting to get that feeling in my chest again. It's a good feeling, but I'm not sure how to describe it. It's an inner calm that comes from the beauty of God's work. I love it, and I just feel so proud. I don't know if that makes sense, maybe I should explain it by saying that I have a sense of reverence and appreciation. It's a kind of feeling that's very... *Spiritual.* It's like I have no real need to leave my garden. I can sit for hours and look at God's creation, and I know that I am privileged to have it all to myself. At the same time, though, I know that I am very, *very* small. I am a man of such small stature that I know that I am something of a nothing, and I know that I must do something to be of any worth at all.

Best wishes,

—Jack.

My man, Jack,

I'm so happy to hear that things have worked out so well for you. I suppose that when you say "garden," you mean the large garden that you have in your backyard. It has a wooden fence all around it and about two acres in all. That's a lot of fucking yard! I think that I will give it a shot at least. I mean, you can't get anywhere in this life unless you make a little effort. That's why God sent me on this journey. I will make that effort, and I

will enjoy what I see. The thing is, my mother has found religion. She says that she believes it. I'll tell you what, though, it's the "female God." It makes my knees quiver just to hear the phrase. She says that the female God is a much better God than the male one that most Christians belong to. She says Allah is a feisty, sexy, sultry woman that has a divine spark. She says that she and her big bad brother Satan have a feud, and if I remember my history lessons correctly, Satan (who is identified with Zeus) and his broods got pissed off at his sister, which led to a battle. Once the battle was over, Satan went up and pissed on the Earth, and it is from there that the Golden Momma got her water. Anyway, she says that I should be praying to this lady named Allah. What do you think of all that?

Anyway, we've moved on from Moscow, and are currently staying in an apartment in Tallinn. There's not much to say about Tallinn other than that it is another provincial, repressed, city, that seems to have forgotten all about the sun. We are staying on the West side of town because that's where the rich people live. Tallinn is not that bad, but you can still tell that there's a secret police hiding in every corner. We fly tomorrow to Riga, which is about three hours away from Tallinn. From there, we will take a train to Latvia, and then from Latvia I will drive to Vilnius, where I will meet up with an old acquaintance of mine named Zemgus, a Pecheneg warrior of whom I've spoken of in the past. From there, we'll take a cab to Kiev, and from there, fly to Britain.

Your friend,

—Charlie.

My dear boy, Charlie,

If I were to describe all of my emotions in one word, it would be *fear*. But don't let that fool you, fear is good! It keeps you on your toes! The only reason that I know that I am truly terrified of something is because I have never known any other emotion. For example, if I am terrified of hearing the phone ring and see the phone sitting right in front of me, I have abso-

lutely no fear of dialing the phone and making a call. I have absolutely no fear of the phone. Hell, I can go right past the phone and ring the doorbell. That's not what's frightening. What's frightening is not being able to do something that I want to do. That's where the fear comes in. Also, for me, the whole world is a scary place.

The other day, I saw an advertisement for makeup, it was this woman who had the entire lip surface of her face, especially her lips, looking like two big black buttons. I'm pretty sure that that woman did not have a soul. I'd like to know if that's really the makeup that they're selling. I think that what they're selling is a memory. It makes you remember a better time in your life, but not even that is there. The irony is that the best time in your life is when you're most afraid. It's when you're most vulnerable and most in danger. That's where the horror and the joy of life are. Life is a string of experiences that give you the most complicated emotions that you can possibly get, but, that doesn't mean that they don't leave you empty. That's what I'm scared of. When you're empty, you're afraid. When you're scared, that's when your soul exists. Right now I am afraid, not of anything in particular, I'm a little tired and I feel kind of sick, and I just want to go to sleep. But, it's not just the need to sleep that's keeping me awake, it's not a matter of being tired, it's fear; It's fear of the day to come. I feel like I've been preparing my whole life for something that I can't even imagine yet. All I know is that I have to do it. Do tell me how you are.
As ever, yours steadfastly,

—Jack.

My dearest friend Jack,

What can I say? I've been feeling strange for a long time now, but the past week has been exceptionally strange. It started out with a really strange dream about a warehouse. A friend of mine and I were working there. In the dream, we were alone, and it wasn't like a regular warehouse where there would be people picking stuff up and bringing it in. It was like the ware-

house was empty, and we were all alone. It was not a very scary dream, but at the same time it was. In the dream, a bird got caught in a cage. I don't remember exactly what happened, but my friend and I could hear it flapping around. I thought that it might've been a parrot or something like that. It was flapping around really loudly, and we thought it was in pain. We heard a voice, telling us to free it. We tried to ignore the voice, but it was really hard to ignore it. It sounded like it was talking to us from all directions, and there was a power emanating from it. The power felt electric, and it almost felt like it was sucking us in. I remember saying that I didn't want to go with the power, and that I didn't want to become its slave. It said that if we didn't free it, it would kill us all. At that moment, the bird died. As soon as it died, I woke up.

My mother told me she was going to stay in the Muscovite Caliphate. I asked her why. She told me she had a limited time on Earth and did not want to spend the last of her days in England. She was instead going to spend her last days being closer to Allah, and so she had to go where she wanted her to go. That got me thinking, she went on to tell me that I needed to make the most of my life. She told me that if I didn't have anything to look forward to, then nothing was going to be able to make me happy.

It felt like I had just had a life-changing experience, but I didn't feel any different. I had an extra ticket to England, I didn't want the money we spent to go to waste. So I went out to a club. The club was really nice, with a huge dance floor and a lot of people I didn't know. I was thinking about all the people who I felt attracted to, and how I wished that I could sleep with them. One woman came up to me, wearing a purple wig, pink lips and a very tight latex dress. She came up close to me and asked me to dance with her. I didn't have a problem with this, and I just started dancing with her. Then, she started touching my chest. She started kissing me. She started going down on me. I didn't mind, and I started feeling really good. She sucked on my t-shirt and it ripped. Then she kissed me

again and went down on me again, and I came. When I came, I just saw fire everywhere. It was like a dream. I got out of the club. My mother told me she loved me, but I just didn't feel anything. I started walking and started thinking about the woman. I went back in and saw her. I asked her why she was wearing a purple wig, and she told me that it was to match her dress. I started following her, she stopped to buy some lottery tickets. I went in and bought some myself. She bought one and scratched it off; it said: "You deserve to be a loved one." The man behind the counter said: "Listen to him," and the woman put the ticket back on the rack and kept walking.

I went to get some more lottery tickets and bought one that said: "It is a big decision. The only way to find out if you should go or stay is to answer the following questions." The woman read it and told me: "I have an answer, but I don't know if it's the right one. Think carefully about what I said."

So I stopped thinking about her and started thinking about the right answer. When I found the answer I ran to the woman and gave her the ticket. I told her to come to England with me. She told me she didn't even know my name, and that I didn't know hers. I told her it didn't matter.

As I write these words, I realize that the flight is in just a few hours, and that I have just been lied to my whole life. I have been conned. I have been conned by someone who is supposed to be my mother. I feel so empty. The dream has scarred me for life. It's terrifying. Why would she leave me for this? I'm going to be sitting in front of the security gate, waiting for them to open it. I am not going to see my mother again. When I get back to the UK, I am going to get a DNA test. No real mother would leave her son in her final days for some religion. I'm going to find out if I'm French, and if I am, I'll buy a plane ticket to France. If I'm not, I'll buy a ticket to the next country on my list. Thank you for reading this.

Yours eternally,

—Charlie.

Jack & Charlie Discover a New Continent. Cap. XXII.

During an investigation of a lost temple in India, Jack and Charlie discovered an, as of yet unknown, landmass. Far South of Sri Lanka, there laid a continent that was unknown to the people of India and the East. Across the sea, there sat the continent of *Taran.*

The inhabitants were not what could be considered humans,—They were tall, human-like creatures, that looked vaguely like Neanderthal men. They were lean, hairy creatures that had beards and strange markings on their faces. They had large hooked noses and rather long pointy ears. The people living on this continent were very pale, with eyes that were black. They had a somewhat strange sense of humor, for it seemed to them that being very slim made them very clever. They laughed when they saw foolish things or felt bad. They would do anything for laughter. They called themselves the *Alapparians*, and dwelt in the Easternmost part of the continent, in a country known as *Taran-Alap.*

Charlie started charting the continent on a map:

"It's shaped like a fucking bent triangle."

"What does that mean?" Asked Jack.

"It means... the shape of the island in space... which I mean, the shape of the island on the map... on which the continent was discovered..."

"Okay, well, what does all this have to do with that lost temple? Is this country called Taran-Ara?"

"Taran-Ara, the name means 'place of the insane.' "

"I wonder, Charlie, how many countries are in this land. Is it really a continent?"

"I have no idea, it just seems like it could be."

They finally arrived at the ruins. The sunlight was failing and Jack was quite amazed at how many holes there were in the stone of the temple. He and Charlie checked the signs which

said on one hand: "Curse this place and your soul be taken," and on the other: "This temple is the tomb of the insane."

Jack and Charlie encountered a number of people inhabiting the ruins, known as the *Arkeans*. They were not human either; they were not even like the Allap people. They had large, cat-like ears, that protruded from their heads, and they were much smaller than normal people. They had gray wrinkled skin and their large bulging eyes were lined with red ocular mucus. They were sort of dressed in tattered clothes that were somewhat in the shape of cats. They had sharp curved claws and clawed feet. They seemed to have furry tails. The hair on their fur was reddish-brown and they were completely bald-headed.

Jack and Charlie began to question the Arkeans.

"What is it with these kinds of damn idiots?" Asked Charlie, "why would you come here? And they're so damn fat."

"They're weird, they don't have thumbs, and they're very difficult to understand, even for me."

The Arkeans began to run around as though they were possessed.

"Run away! Run away!"

"What the hell is wrong with them?"

"They're getting ready to go crazy."

"I know what you mean. They're going to eat us."

The Arkeans started laughing. Then, they spoke in perfect English: "What are you doing here? Oh! What a funny fucking joke. We don't have to eat anyone. You've made a funny fucking mistake."

"What?"

"What is the meaning of life?"

"Oh, that makes sense. You're obviously not getting enough junk food."

"You're alive?"

"Oh, you've never seen it before? Do you want to?"

They began to laugh hysterically.

"Our souls are in hell. How did this happen?"

"Here is the true answer: We are evil."

"Oh, okay. So, why did you come here then?"

"To get your souls back."

"Let's eat them now!"

"No."

"So, who are you? I've never seen you before."

"We're the demons."

"Oh, come on! We're not children. How are you here?"

"We're the demons from hell. I am Lucifer. They are the Archons."

"How come I never saw you before?"

"You're just not paying attention. We're all around you. You have to pay attention to the situation around you."

"Well, fuck you then."

"That's not very nice."

They didn't like Jack, or Charlie.

"Look," said Jack, "a ship of Indian and Indonesian archaeologists and scientists was lost. Did you see a ship?"

"What's an Indian?"

"An Indian is a person from India."

"I've never been to India."

"That's because you're stupid."

"Yeah, you know what? Let's go. Just kill the fuckers and eat them."

"No, we'll kill the fuckers and fuck them too. But first, what is an Indonesian? What are you, idiots? You've obviously not read the sign."

"The sign?"

"The sign! You've been tricked. I'm the bastard son of Satan and you're going to have to start listening to me."

"Look, Indonesians are a people who's empire stretches from the islands of Indonesia to the borders of Peru and China. Not to mention, they're really intelligent."

"They're also an ethnic group. Have you seen any of their dead bodies?"

"No. Why?"

"Look, I'm a demon from hell."

"What's a demon from hell?"

"A demon is a fallen angel."

"They're not angels, they're assholes. Look, they're going to try and trap us in a dimensional rift, or a riff. In any case, we should slaughter them all right here and now."

With that, Jack drew his gun, a six-shooter.

Charlie began to smoke cigarettes.

"Who are you smoking?"

"A pack of *Dutch Masters*."

"You should smoke an *Irish Stoon*."

"What?"

"I don't smoke Stoons."

"Why not? It's the best smoke you'll ever find. But first, let's kill these bastards. It'll be doing the good Allaparians a favor."

"Wait!" Cried a female Arkean. Unlike her male counterparts, she was not feline or fat at all, she was tall, straight as an arrow. In fact, she was composed of tiny, coiling, vibrating, all-seeing spider-like legs, with thick, translucent skin, like gossamer, and a long, fan-like awning of silver that shined brilliantly in the sunlight, sprouting out of her back. That's what all female Arkeans looked like.

"I've never fucked a human before. What say we cohabitate, I carry your sons, and then we tell you what we know?"

Jack and Charlie looked at each other:

"Very well," they said, then they grabbed her and started fucking her right there on the side of the highway. The gun was out of sight, but it was probably still there.

When their eyes closed, all of the demons felt pain, like they had taken a dozen kicks to the groin. Jack and Charlie looked up to see what they had done to them. All of them were dead, mangled corpses.

"Oh my god," said Jack, "I am so sorry. I am so, so sorry." But he wasn't sorry.

They left the female Arkean there. She told them that the scientists were eaten by them long ago, and she didn't have a

chance to fuck them. After that, Jack shot her and she went to be with the rest of her kin in the great cosmic slaughter-pit.

They continued southwest and came upon a new land, which was marked by a sign that simply said: 'welcome to Taran-Ghe.'

Taran-Ghe meant 'land of the big purple motherfucking dinosaur.' That seemed very auspicious to Jack, who was already feeling that this day was going pretty well.

Then a spindly, but large, creature came out to greet him. He was a purple, scaly, lizard with one eye. He had no visible mouth. He told Jack that he wanted the demon's guns, because he was going to steal them and do bad things with them:

"You see, many, many people, and even dwarves, come through my kingdom, and I take what they have. Just a present."

"This is none of your fucking business," said Jack.

The lizard laughed, as long, soft, rainbow raspberries came out of his mouth:

"You do not know a thing of what I know, strange creature. Perhaps in time you will know. In the meantime, the young sword, it is you who carries it. Please take a good look at my eye. Just watch. See it change from milky to purple as I devour your bones?" The lizard said, as if asking a question.

It stepped closer to Jack, it's nose practically touching Jack's, and his dark, deep, eye seeming to look into Jack's soul.

The blade was really cold.

They decided to run. No need to fight a big purple lizard. They ran for miles.

Jack and Charlie stopped running.

They started laughing. They were naked, and clearly under-the-influence of something.

Then they saw the eglantine glades before them. The trees that surrounded the glades were purple, and larger than anything Jack had ever seen. They weren't trees, they were mounds, their roots connected to enormous, moss-covered, mounds that made up their buildings.

They approached one, and Jack tried to climb it, but the trunk was too large. The tree was so tall that its tip touched the clouds, but the glades themselves were perfect.

"Say, Charlie, do you think there are other worlds out there? Do you think it is easy to get lost in that blank white space?"

"You mean, what if we are just like the trees?"

"What do you mean?"

"What if every world is a giant field of nothing?"

"Oh, but I think they are nothing, Charie. You know how there are magic things and stuff, you can bend light, if you really wanted? There are other worlds too, but they don't have colors. Maybe they just don't have much there, because they all had to be squashed together to fit in that big box of a universe. What do you think?"

"What is their culture like?"

"I don't know. Have you ever read 'To the Lighthouse?' I think their culture is a bit like that. The lighthouse keeper tells stories, but only when he wants something. Some of the stories are weird and stupid, some are just plain boring. And then there are stories where you have to get lost to find them."

"Is there magic in those stories?"

"Sure, Charlie, why do you think everyone wants to get lost in the forests?"

They were climbing up another purple mound. Jack saw some bushes, and began to go towards them.

Charlie called out: "Hey, Jack!"

Jack turned around: "What?"

Charlie ran over to Jack and began to try and climb up:

"Look!" He said.

Jack looked behind him, there was a small stream behind the purple mound, with trees around it. But the stream wasn't going down, it was going up. They could tell this because there was a creek that ended at the top of the mound, and dried up there. The eglantine mounds were probably very ancient, the water could only go up, which is why their buildings were so large. They were hundreds of feet high.

"Come on," Charlie said.

They went down and walked along the creek. It went uphill, but you could tell it was going in the right direction.

"There is a cliff over there," said Charlie, pointing.

"Which way does the stream go, Charlie?"

"It goes all the way over there, I guess."

"I think we have to go up there."

"Why? There is no water down here."

"Well, we don't know what is out there."

"You mean, because there is no light? Because there are no colors?"

"I don't know what it is, but it is something, I am sure."

Jack started climbing up the eglantine mound. The grass was soft and squishy. The walls were soft and white, but the sides of the mound were steep and very tall. Jack climbed higher and higher, then he looked down.

He was not sure how to climb back down. It would be very steep. He couldn't see any way down.

Charlie came over. He was also climbing up the mound.

"What do you see down there?"

"I don't know, Charlie, all I see are branches, and grass."

"What if there is a cliff?"

"Maybe."

"Then we better go down there."

"Come on."

They went down. There was another stream. This one did not go uphill. It went straight down the slope. They followed it down, and it went on for a long time.

"We are lost," said Jack.

Charlie thought he had a good idea: "Let's go up and over to the left, then we can go back up this way."

They went up and over.

As they were going back up, Jack said:

"It could be a few days until we are found. They—the Allaparians—will send out the search party. But we can wait. Be-

sides, the red-hued lights we saw just ahead look really cool. Do you want to go see?"

"It might be our only chance. The Allaparians may think we are dead."

They went up to the red-hued lights.

The lights were dazzling, streaking across the sky and the water and the tree trunks. They made strange patterns, as though the lights were being hit by colored particles. The grass grew as tall as the trees around the stream.

"What's this?" Charlie thought, "where are we?"

Jack saw the Anchor-shaped Allaparian spaceship. He knew that the spaceship had used the red light to fly here, but now it was fading. The red light was dying. He wondered why. The trees around the stream were very tall and tall; it was almost like a forest. A spaceship landed in the middle of the stream. The doors opened. Two Allaparians came out. They started walking towards them. They wore white. The man stepped in front of Jack and said: "We have been looking for you. It's time we brought you back to England, if you want to come."

"That sounds great!" Jack said, "why don't we get on the spaceship now?"

"We will have to wait until the red light dies completely. Then we go," the man answered.

They watched as the red efflorescent light danced across the sky like a water drop. They were slowly disappearing behind the trees.

"The red light will never fade completely," the man said, "in time it will just turn green. And it is not a very interesting color, green; so we will not miss it. There are, of course, all sorts of interesting colors in the universe, but not as interesting as red. It has a unique color. Not many colors have that. Red is the color of anger, of fire, of rebellion, of destruction; but it is also a color of love, of compassion, of peace, of life."

They thought that was a pretty good thing to think. So they started walking to the spaceship. And, as the gate of the ship closed behind them, Jack drew his gun.

Jack & Charlie Engage in Botany. Cap. XXIII.

During an expedition to a famined land, Jack and Charlie were researching plants.

"What's the tastiest tree you've ever eaten, Charlie?" Jack asked.

"Actually, I don't know of any tree that tastes good."

"Come on, Charlie, tell me one tree. Anyone can tell you're an expert in forest plants."

Charlie gave him a flat look.

"There are some trees that look like they could possibly be edible, but we couldn't tell for sure."

Jack clucked his tongue: "The whole point of this is to taste something that's new and exciting, not what you're already eating, Charlie. I'm all for researching plant life and trying new things, but surely you can understand that the key to our survival is our food, right?"

"True, although some things are edible..." Charlie muttered under his breath, like the name "Philis" or "Francis."

They hiked until night fell.

With the moon rising, Jack suddenly spotted something sticking out of the earth, so he pulled it out.

"Let's test it!" He said.

He dipped a finger in and scooped up a pink lollipop, on which he'd written "try this" in red marker.

Charlie's eyes widened:

"That's delicious, let's eat it now."

"We're not allowed to eat plants unless we can tell for sure it's edible, Charlie. We have to test it out in a controlled environment, not like eating a raspberry popsicle."

"Okay," Charlie answered.

They ate the sticky confection together, both feeling itchy from being surrounded by hundreds of feet of grass. But once they washed it down with a big swig of water from Jack's canteen, it was down right gummy.

"It's really good, Jack."

Jack and Charlie swam to shore and dropped the wad of lollipop in the dirt. Soon after, they'd disappeared into the trees, Jack saw his canteen float down from a high branch, disgorging a fat, bitter, rind that smelled like rancid eggs. He whipped out his dagger and snatched it up, but the rind turned to dust and disintegrated, leaving behind nothing but a trail of lighter colored dirt. He waded back into the water and swam away.

A few hours later, Jack awoke from the sound of the dogs barking: "Charlie! Where are you? I'm all alone here!"

He emerged onto the shore, dazed. The whole length of the river where he'd been camping was strewn with leaves and twigs. Above the bank the bushes were covered in mushrooms. Jack went over to inspect them, but they were starting to sprout spores.

"This forest is infested with toxic plants!" He yelled.

One by one, the three big dogs came bounding toward him, some covered in spores and some not.

"You guys are toxic!" Jack shouted, trying to get them away with his boot. But one of the dogs nipped at his boot, and Jack's shoe began to disintegrate.

Charlie stumbled out from under the bushes, screaming, with a cat in his arms: "Listen, kid, I'm not your momma, so I'm not gonna tell you what to do," he said, "but you better come with me right now; it's a free for all here."

"You're gonna eat it, right?" Jack asked.

Charlie nodded.

"Look, it's okay," Jack said, reassuring the cat, "it's just a little bit of plant, you can get used to it." He held up his arm, but he knew it wasn't good enough.

They stared at a new plant.

"Let's try it!" Jack said.

He took a purple flower and filled his palm with its seeds.

Charlie frowned:

"That doesn't even sound appetizing," he said.

"Try it," Jack insisted. He dipped a finger in, then picked up the seed, and in his other hand he held the purple flower.

Charlie watched, aghast, as Jack bit into the seed and sucked the juice out of his finger.

Jack looked up at Charlie: "See? That's a flavor, Charlie! A completely new flavor. Pretty amazing, right?"

Charlie nodded solemnly:

"Let's take a picture of it to prove it!"

They crouched and positioned their cameras on the treetops and snapped a few shots, but, as the sun disappeared, and their batteries went dead, the dogs lost their patience.

The three dogs started to growl and growl, gesturing with their paws to join them.

"Uh, Charlie," Jack said, crouching beside the dog closest to him, "why don't you come down here and watch me eat this petrified wad of purple mush?"

"Are you insane?" Charlie hissed.

Jack sighed: "Okay..."

He put the purple flower in his mouth, closed his eyes, and turned his head away. He imagined Charlie's face smiling with glee, the way he used to, back when they were walking 'cross the palisades of Liverpool. As he chewed, Jack felt a peculiar tugging sensation in his mouth. When he opened his eyes, he saw that the purple flower had disappeared from his hand, leaving behind only a lump of wax. He looked down, and there, lying on the ground at his feet, was the most beautiful blue-green marble he'd ever seen: "It's a... rainbow ball," he said, "don't you think it's beautiful?"

Charlie grinned: "Yeah, it's great."

He took a sip of his soft drink: "I feel like it's laughing at us." He tossed it into the river, where it spun around for a moment, then broke into a dozen pieces, scattering in all directions.

They spent the rest of the night in the woods, looking for more new plants, wondering what they were all about. And they argued about ,what Charlie called, their "struggle," and, what Jack called,—their "destiny."

As they walked back to the city center the next morning, Charlie said to his friend: "You know what?"

"What?" Jack asked.

"We should go back and get it, you know, just to make sure it really exists."

"What about-"

"Just come on, I'm gonna bring it back with me, and we'll make a moment of it."

They walked a while in silence. Then, Jack cleared his throat:

"The world is so confusing, Charlie. I don't even know what's real anymore. Some days I think I do, but then I see you eating a thing you dug up from the ground yesterday, or I take a bite of this blue-green marble—you don't even have to buy it, it just shows up—and I realize that these things that I thought were real, don't exist at all."

Charlie looked at him, tears in his eyes:

"It's funny how that works."

"Oh, shut up," said Jack, "we all know the real stuff's a lot better. Those leaves are full of antioxidants and full of healthy nutrients, and those rocks in the stream that are always sparkling aren't even in there anymore, they're floating on the water, and those colorful flowers that grow in this park never die. And when you eat that meat, your body transforms and you become one with the earth, even if for just a moment, before you get back to being an animal... We're human, Charlie, I think so at least. Everything we do is either a blessing or a curse."

"Whatever, I don't think it matters, Jack. Even if it exists, I'd rather not spend my life doing everything I can to get it."

Jack sighed: "I don't think you're making very good points, Charlie. What about all the mornings I've woken up with no recollection of ever getting out of bed? What about that time I hit a woman over the head with a book and took her place in the stock exchange? You don't even remember the day you met Steve?"

Charlie flinched: "Hey, that was just... I mean, we were on that island, right? And when I said I'd never seen the show? That was a lie, or at least half a lie. I mean, I don't remember what I ate for lunch today, do you? And now we've got to go

back to the city, where we'll never see the beautiful blue-green marble or anything that doesn't fit the world's exact description."

"It's funny, really. I could hear you, with all your wisdom and all your 'proof,' but I really didn't believe you. And then there you were, eating that rock."

Jack laughed, but then Charlie heard it too and looked at Jack in the eyes: "What's funny?" He said.

"The rock, Charlie, it's still there, in the stream. That's proof that it's not real. Nothing can be real if it's still in the stream."

"You mean that there's no such thing as a living stone? Like what they make in fairy tales?"

"No, I mean nothing can be real, Charlie. Everything we do here, we bring back with us and share it with others. And even though what you and I did isn't real, if you did it a thousand times,—it *would* be. And the only thing that's real is this," Jack tapped his chest, "this is my real body. You get one of these each time you die."

Charlie glanced around the woods: "Yeah, I've seen my share of corpses. Maybe not all the times, but I bet you do, too."

Jack laughed again: "No, Charlie, those are all dead people. Each of them was a living, breathing human being, until we killed them. It's not a lie, not one bit. The rocks, the forests, the sunsets, everything is real, Charlie. Real, even if you can't see it, taste it, or smell it."

"So, Charlie," Jack continued, "when you die, I don't mean that like it's a bad thing, I mean you just die. You turn to dust. You leave no trace behind."

"Like this," Charlie said, "the only thing left of me are the words I've written on this paper."

Jack nodded: "But we keep a record of who we are, Charlie, all our lives we build up our stories, our memories, and when we die, we leave a reminder of the times we've been here."

"And this paper is real?"

"It is real."

"But the rocks?"

"The rocks are real, and the river, and the ocean; all of it. If we walk to the end of the world and back, we'll find evidence that we've been there."

Charlie nodded, and the world began to slip away. Charlie pushed back, and suddenly the sun was bright and warm. The pain in his back and his sides were gone. A healthy look came to his face, as his body shrank back to its normal size:

"Where are we?" He asked.

"We're on this island."

"What's the sign?"

"You'll have to find that out yourself."

"I see the arch."

Charlie opened his eyes. He was staring at the arch of blue-green marble that had always stood at the center of the hilltop of the camp. The brown and black rocks that littered the ground were the other side of the arch.

"Welcome home, Charlie."

Jack & Charlie Seek out the Minikinians. Cap. XXIV.

THe Minikinians, also knows as the "Eal-and-Timber-Bow culture," were a near godly race of humans from North America, who invented the internet, the atomic bomb, and space travel. At some point, they simply left the Earth to take to the stars.

Armed with Alapatian technology, Jack and Charlie were now set on finding these spacefarers.

"Jack, how do you figure we'll know where they are?"

Jack didn't think he knew any more about where they were:

"We're just gonna have to track them down," he said.

They were in a ship shaped like an anchor.

Charlie pointed to a hatch at the bottom of the ship:

"What's in there?"

"Nothing of note, what's the radar say?"

The radar hummed.

"They are coming to us. We will head towards them now."

"How do you get the radar to work?"

"We have a facility in our bloodstream called the 'Timboran Abiola,' where we capture these Timboran Transformers. See this device?"

Jack bent down to get a closer look at the device.

"Yeah, it looks like a phone."

"This is the communicator, Jack."

"How do I use this?"

"You hold the transmitter. You put this thing in the ear and you say: 'I'm Jack, and I'm in charge of this party.' "

Jack obeyed and began to hear a dial tone.

"Hi. It's Jack. Is this Earth?"

"Hi Charlie. Hi Jack. This is Earth." Came the answer. It was Nourain.

"Cool. Any updates? Where are you?"

"I am at Cross Moya. Let me show you the picture."

Charlie held the transmitter closer to his face and zoomed in on the image, which was of a bunch of creatures in some kind of small spacecraft or platform:

"They must be the Minikinians. Look at this one. What's that bio-luminescent attachment on the back of their arms?"

The pads on their forearms were round and made out of light, almost like a star.

"They have two large turbines on their backs. I wonder what they use them for?"

Jack remembered that the Minikinians we're a spiritual race, one that believed in "energy waves." Could they run down these great engines like a car or drive?

"You better start piloting your ship. The spaceship is not going to take off if you just sit there."

Jack shoved Charlie out of the way and started the ship. The ship started a wheezing sound and jerked around, almost spilling Jack out of his seat.

He picked himself up, pushed a button, and the next thing he knew, he was in the grassy terrain of K'tahdah.

K'tahdah,—a sparsely populated planet which the Minikinians had settled. Jack and Charlie were, however, in it's capital city, which was more populous than any city Charlie or Jack had ever seen. The buildings were all made of native African timber and wood-paneled. Most of the buildings on the planet were made of flat wood and were thatched on the outside. It was very similar to the architecture of parts of the Brazilian rain-forest.

Charlie thought it was a strange and beautiful sight to see.

Jack and Charlie were walking down the streets of the main city, wandering without any real goal.

"There's nothing to do here, and we have no food. I want to see what these Minikinians are all about. I think we will get an answer when we see them in person."

Charlie agreed. They walked on in silence.

There was a loud whooshing sound that suddenly pierced the air and startled Jack and Charlie. It felt like a giant suction cup had suddenly grabbed onto Charlie's head. Jack stared at his friend in horror, frantically trying to pry the metal object off.

"Get out of the way!" Jack screamed, as the metal creature continued to eat Charlie's face.

Jack had pushed Charlie into the street. He grabbed his friend by the arms and yelled for help.

He saw a group of Minikinians running towards them, but before they had gotten to them, the metal creature was pulled off of Charlie's face. The attackers quickly defeated and removed the creature, cutting off the tendril attached to Charlie's face with their alien nails.

"What the fuck was that?" Sputtered Charlie.

"The real question," said Tiathu, of the Miniki, "is, who are *you*?"

"My name is Charlie and this is my good chum Jack. We came here to figure out what you Minikinians are all about. Why did you leave Earth? Why leave an empire behind?"

The Minikinians looked at each other with a mix of puzzlement, anger, and distaste.

One of the Minikinians gave them a strange looking device that looked like a stick with a thick metal spike coming out of the top: "I am Gunmar," he said, "leader of the police force here, and these are my robots. You will take this device and stick it in your nose. If you want us to help you, you have to tell us everything you can about your Earth."

They did as they were told.

"So," said one of the natives, Degina, "you've hardly advanced from the cradle. What do you want?"

"We want to understand the reasons for your departure. What made you leave? What's so awful about Tierra del Fuego?"

"Are you so ignorant to believe that Tierra del Fuego is not horrible? For starters, I have seen the human race destroy it's own environment. The worst place on Earth to live, for example, have you?"

"Hmm... yeah," said Charlie, "not to mention the pollution, greed, and the great unwashed. My friend Jack here killed a guy with a tractor, though. We have that kinda problem back on Earth. But tell us, what have you learned from probing our minds?"

"Not much," said Tiathu, "and that's precisely the problem. Humanity has done nearly nothing since we left them. The only things we have discovered is that humans are nice people and like building. Not a single invention, however, after we had been gone for a thousand years."

"Nice people?" Another Minikinian, Sethiwasu, scoffed. "They destroy more than they build. If they are so nice, then why do they destroy the environment? What's so wonderful about building things?"

"The people on Tierra del Fuego," Tiathu said, "and subsequently all of Earth, destroyed their planet. They need to learn that what they leave behind, they have to take with them. Oh, and this is just one of their problems; they are addicted to war."

"War? But isn't war good?" Asked Sethiwasu.

"It's only good if you win. Otherwise, it's just evil. We are the only species that does not fight, and even we practice war occa-

sionally. War has never taught them to become better than what they are. Look at how terrible Earth is. Everyone is miserable."

"But, war teaches us to resolve problems!" Protested Charlie.

"It teaches people to be horrible to each other," Tiathu answered, "it doesn't teach them how to live with each other peacefully. If they learn how to live peacefully, there wouldn't be so many wars. You humans have proven time and again that you do not live together peacefully, so I can only assume that the key to ending your wars is never to practice war at all; which is a lesson humanity never learned, unfortunately."

Sethiwasu got up and left the group.

"So, how would they stop their wars then?" Gunmar asked.

"I don't know," said Tiathu, "they don't seem to be interested in ending their wars, as it is. They just keep fighting and killing."

"Well, we are here," said Jack.

"And we wish you weren't," said Gunmar, "you two are horrible people. You'd probably kill us all, if you had the chance. We just peered into your mind and saw what horrors you have inflicted upon your own species. You treat people like worthless trash. You steal, you murder, you subjugate, and you kill in a thousand different ways. You fuck them, crush them, shoot them, poison them, imprison them, starve them, bomb them... You are so evil, it scares me."

"I didn't say that I was good, or that our species is good. You're being quite defensive. But now that I think about it, why didn't you teach the rest of humanity to live peacefully before you left Earth?"

"Our prime directive is to explore and to learn, so we did. But I'm afraid not every people are born with the knack, the means, or the culture with which they could cultivate a culture of peace. The few that do are a small minority, and they are a cruel, vicious minority."

"So you admit to being terrible," said Charlie.

"If we were not terrible, then we would not be here."

"But you judge me and my friend here for living our lives as we please. And don't tell me you expanded through peaceful means. You still raped and pillaged, killed and subjugated, oppressed and conquered. Not that you're bad, of course, but we're not like you. Not after what we've seen. So, in the end, your purity of heart is a fiction."

The Minikinians and Charlie stared at each other for a moment, then Jack spoke again:

"Now that we've thoroughly confused each other, and have raised some serious and important questions, we've essentially hit square one. You really had no good reason to leave Earth beyond something disturbing occurring in Tierra del Fuego, which is, in the grand scheme of things, a tiny island in what was once a world spanning empire. Not that we're saying you shouldn't have done it. You're wonderful, but in that circumstance it would have been folly to stick around. But you still had a world worth exploring, a culture worth spreading, a species worth saving, so I guess I can't say you were wrong or right."

"Yes, you can," said Tiauthu, "it had been far too easy to leave Earth in such a manner."

"No shit," said Charlie, "but once you went, you went for good."

"That's not the way the saying goes," protested Degina, "the saying goes that you have only one life, and you should spend it learning and spreading your culture, not simply riding the great wheel of life. The phrase is: 'Learn, spread, and leave,' not 'get, get, get, get, get, and leave.' I'd say you went for the 'learn, get, and leave' part, but since it isn't a saying, and it didn't come from our people, we wouldn't know."

Jack looked pensive.

"So, in short, your purpose was to leave Earth and spread your culture to other worlds?" Asked Charlie, less laconically than he had up to this point.

Gunmar nodded:

"Exactly," he said, "and to explore new worlds. As you know, it's impossible for an organic being to function in an entirely new world, so we had to learn some things there."

"Why? Why the need to explore and learn? Just live your life where you are. What difference would that make?"

"Difference?" said Degina, looking confused, "difference? We spent nearly a millennium cultivating our culture back on Earth, and it was dying out. Every single idea that made our culture superior was being discarded, and we had no heir to carry our culture on. But we built our culture, while living our lives on Earth. You see, when you create a culture on a world, there's a type of shared language that can only exist when you live together in a space where you have no choice but to talk to one another, and to hear one another. It's a shared set of expressions, expressions that can only exist as a result of the intimacy of sharing a world and a culture, and as a result of the ability to listen to one another."

"Okay... so other humans are rubbish, I get that; but why leave us with all the technology?"

"Well, we can't have it all our way," said Siawathu, waving his hands, "if we didn't, we wouldn't be able to reap the rewards of the technology we developed. We expected some race of humans to be able to make their way to our new abode,—although we certainly didn't expect it to be so belated, and the emissaries to be two wandering psychopaths with deadly weapons. The heart of the matter is that we, as a race, need other humans for knowledge and entertainment and companionship, as you will learn. But we can't, simply must not, become dependent upon them, for any long-term goals, or our culture won't survive. We have adapted and developed a culture to be resilient to outside influences, and I think the other races that are now discovering us would have done well to do the same. But we can't force them to adapt, and we can't force them to learn."

"You're scared," said Charlie, "you're scared of a human revolt."

"That," said one stout Minikinian, "is a distinct possibility.

We cannot be completely confident that humanity will not destroy itself,—the apocalypse to end all apocalypses—unless it is given enough time and education to actually become self-aware and capable of developing the kind of technology and culture it needs to survive. Now, if they did develop such technology, I suspect it would be of significantly higher quality and efficiency than any technology we have. And if the technology is develop in a sufficient time, we could face the possibility of them retaliating by exploring, destroying, and colonizing our own world. But as long as they're the source of internal strife, misery, and disappointment, humanity may not develop such technology in sufficient time, or with enough knowledge, to bring about such a disastrous scenario. That's the *irony law of independent development*: The first civilization develops and conquers. The second one comes, destroys and exterminates, creating the conditions for the third, and so on. Humans are a lot like any other species, and despite the potential to become independent and develop, they are not entirely capable of it, due to their genetic inferiority, combined with their tendency to war with one another. I think this is the reason why ancient civilizations have usually been wiped out, eventually, and why their descendants haven't really been established as a stable culture for this reason. It's not simply that it's unwise for such a culture to develop and colonize, and that, in any event, we are fairly evenly matched with any potential civilization, it's simply that we've been around for only a few thousand years, and have barely started our genocidal cycle. For the next several generations we could end up destabilizing the planet so much that life as we know it is extinct, which may not be the worst thing in the world. We have been attempting to establish ourselves as a truly singular civilization, and if that were to fail, there would still be a chance that the universe itself would, in its infinite wisdom, wipe itself out. It is, after all, the only reason why there is life here. So you see, we have made these long-term plans, based on the threats that we may or may not face in the future, and this small world is much better prepared than any other to withstand such

threats. You don't have the power to destroy the universe, and that's the greatest assurance we have that humanity will be able to survive. It may be sad, but we aren't too concerned about humanity, or any other species, really. We exist for our own survival. We have become as close to the perfect species as one can be, and I don't see why that would change, should humanity cease to exist. Our genes will continue on as they did before, but perhaps with a little less cultural variation, thanks to us being isolated from other inferior cultures on Earth. That's changing though, as we have begun to encounter non-human cultures more often than not, as we venture further and further into space. As it is, we don't really have any competitors for our survival. As I said earlier, we're just waiting for our evolution to finish, and the next generation of organisms will evolve into the next stage, and then we will probably be on the verge of a new phase of our existence, when we are no longer under the influence of natural selection."

"So... you mean..." Charlie struggled to find the words, "you can destroy... uhh... Reality?"

"Of course, I don't think you're too excited about that, I know I wouldn't be. For that reason, we're not going to destroy the entire universe just yet. We can't do it, as it would, of course, destroy us. But we can remove at least one species from the whole. It wouldn't be a problem if we went after a primitive culture, but it would be a tragedy if we were to eliminate the only advanced civilization left."

"So what are you planning to do, then?"

"First, we must purge a planet of a species that is capable of developing space travel technology that would allow them to threaten the existence of the entire universe, that is, until they became extinct. The next step would be to remove them from time. To do this, we would have to reach into the future, and put some sort of program in place that will ensure the destruction of that civilization. As you might imagine, such a program is very difficult to implement, since it would require keeping constant watch over the entire history of that civilization. That

is quite a trick, as the mere existence of that civilization is a constant threat to the rest of the universe. We would need to make sure that it would die out within a period of several centuries. And we would need to ensure that all those who know of it can never create a copy of it, since a copy would always be vulnerable to an unforeseen biological agent. Since it is a matter of universal survival, the perfect species would need to be eradicated from the entire galaxy. It wouldn't be easy, but I think we have the right kind of species for it."

The other Minikinians were horrified at the cold, cruel, and inhuman dispassion of the speaker of these words.

His name was Podsiadly, one of the most renowned scholars among the Minikinians, but also one of the most despised. Even among his own race he was a strange and unique being, who claimed that the laws of natural selection had been supplanted by some other, 'nonexistent principle,' which caused organisms to have the potential to evolve and become vastly more powerful than their evolutionary ancestors. He was the leading proponent of "The Long Now," a movement that aimed to increase the human lifespan to an age more than a thousand years long, as a counter to the increasingly destructive power of technology. The Long Now held the opinion that such weapons would eventually be capable of ending the human racee, and Podsiadly wanted to ensure that this wouldn't happen, by making every human immortal, so that they would have time to learn and understand and improve their civilization, and not leave it to a faster and more adaptive species that could take advantage of their inventions. Unfortunately, he was hated by nearly everyone, and when he came to tell them that he had discovered a creature that was both capable of creating a "back door" into the great temporal annals, the other Minikinians found themselves divided into two groups, and were soon reaching for their ray guns and heavy shields.

Podsdiasly,—who was a dwarf—apparently aware that he had left things on a rather bleak note, said: "But, we can't take any chances. We have been attempting to re-create some of our

better technologies, such as transportation and energy sources, but the results have been discouraging, and the ideas of those who have been studying them have been very depressing. I only hope that the two of you will have something that will save us, before we become extinct."

"I'm afraid that's not possible," Gunmar said, "I am sure you have been down this path before. The energies necessary for transmuting such massive waste-produts are far beyond what we can even begin to imagine. And if we knew how to make it work, then we could probably make something more stable, but I don't think that-"

"Look here friend, we just want to do something at this point," said an exasperated Charlie, "who gives a damn about what we can or cannot do? We need a gun, and we need one now."

"What you call a gun," interjected Sandra, "is nothing more than a tool for destroying the world. Any sane human being understands that, and would be mortified if they knew what you were planning."

"And you?" said Charlie, "why are you so bitter about this?"

"What can I say, I am a pessimist," she replied, "the most dangerous humans on this planet are the pessimists, and I am not kidding."

"You underestimate your own value to the whole group," answered Charlie.

Sandra was a beautiful woman. Charlie was absolutely floored by her proportions, her face. He had never been with a native American before, and certainly not a member of a quasi-godly race. He was determined to take this mythical creature, if it was the last thing he ever did.

A tall, thin, sleek, raven-haired girl, with skin that was the deepest red, just like the dying suns of her home-world, standing next to Sandra, stepped forward, with her arms folded across her chest. She was studying Sandra's features, and perhaps was gauging her reaction.

"I disagree with your assessment of the threat to the entire world, Miss Sandra," said Kendra, "and this situation could easily be resolved if we work together, united."

"I don't care if I have to beat some sense into you, Kendra." Sandra said, sternly.

"But, if you really believe that we're all going to die, then there's no point to doing anything, is there?" asked Charlie, "why not simply enjoy the last few years that you have, and go out on top, having explored the universe and understanding every aspect of it?"

"I already have!" said Sandra, without taking her eyes off of Kendra, "I've learned all I can, from quantum physics and paleontology, and I've explored every single corner of the planet. No one here will make it to another century."

Jack was getting impatient. These Minnikians spoke in terms that made him angry, using terms like 'puny humanoids,' 'weaklings,' and 'dwindling species.' And if they were going to treat him as a subhuman, then they better make sure that they took care of it in the next couple of minutes:

"Alright, you Minnikians have made your case," he said, "now, let's see if I have made my own."

Jack stepped forward and unholstered his gun. The first shots shattered several of the Minnikian heads.

The second round knocked over Sandra, who fell to the floor, clutching at her arm. A couple of shots clipped Kendra in the shoulder and she fell to the floor as well.

Jack fired again at the Minnikians, all four of them hit, and their heads flew off, one by one.

Charlie grabbed Sandra, and Jack grabbed Kendra, and they tied them up and brought them back to their ship.

"What are you doing?" Cried Sandra.

"We're taking you as slaves, like you took the English!" Said Charlie, "to your little Eden, where you'll live out the rest of your days in bliss, free from the curse that drove you to commit such atrocities."

"What?" Said Sandra, confused.

Then they started raping them, over and over again. They were now wanted criminals in K'tahdah. Sandra's pussy tasted like summertime, fresh as a breeze. And she felt her skin crawl every time Charlie entered her. She eventually began to learn to enjoy the feeling of his penis inside her. It was not long before she began to writhe with the pleasure of it.

Jack fucked Kendra slowly, with short, shallow, strokes.

Sandra and Charlie had no idea what was happening, but they both enjoyed it. Kendra was sobbing every time Jack entered her, there was no one else out in space who could fuck her that well.

The ship began to move away from the strange planet.

"It's okay," said Jack, as he slowly pulled out of her, "you're alright, we're going to take care of you, here. Your owners will be waiting for you when you get back."

Eventually, the two laid on the floor, their legs wide open, their pussies spasming and pulsing.

Kendra cried.

"We've got to bring them back to Earth," said Charlie, "and wife them before they get any ideas."

Charlie went over to a panel on the wall and typed in an email address on the keypad. Then, he typed in a few more lines of gibberish that he found in the manual, and hit the send button.

The ship shot towards Earth at a blinding speed. There was a tear in the space-time continuum, and the planet began to shrink, like an ice cube being dragged through hot water.

In the white void, Charlie held a trash can in his hands, as Jack, Sandra, and Kendra all stared out through the ship's main window.

The Earth was now a ball of garbage. The cities and towns had been replaced by twisted piles of metal, plastic, and glass. The once green trees were now dark brown and gray, and crackled with electricity. And the sky was black, with intermittent flashes of lightning, and the sound of thunder and the screams of the people who had been burned alive.

"What have they done to us," said Jack, who sounded like he had lost his voice, "what have they done to us all!"

And then everything was normal again. The sky was blue, and the grass was green. The trees were covered in blooming flowers. People ran down the street, laughing and singing. Children played in the streets. They walked in the sunshine. They stopped, and watched the rain, so they could listen to it on the roof. They rode bikes, they rode horses, they rode roller coasters. The four landed safely on a patch of grass, next to a park. They walked over to the fence, and climbed over it.

"Where are we?" Asked Sandra.

Charlie stared at his future wife:

"We're right back where we started," he said.

Sandra didn't reply.

"If anyone asks, tell them we're just on a hike," said Charlie, as they walked down the street.

The small black boy, who had been walking next to them, turned around, and they stared at each other.

Jack & Charlie Contemplate. Cap. XXV.

TWilight settled over the house, its evening lamps lighting the dew. The ground was saturated with liquid gold, the iron shutters drawn, the doors fastened, and the windows left open to the dark sky. The air was still, save for a rare stray breeze that flickered through the high-vaulted dormer gables. All in the house were surprised at the coolness, the singing and laughing had died away, and there was stillness.

The car drew up; the pair took off their cloaks and capes, and crossed the gravel to the drawing-room window. They entered, the candles were lit, and the manager, his arm round a girl's waist, led them to their places. The manager and his wife had chosen the best for the purpose,—the easy chair, and the sofa, and the ottoman.

Jack and Charlie took their places on the sofa and the chair. Charlie smirked, and, very gentleman-like, took a cigar out of

his pocket and held it out in the middle of the coffee table, between them.

"Enjoy," he whispered, and blew on his lighted cigarette.

"What's the word?" Jack asked.

"Hard to say, I can't see them yet."

"See what?"

"The package," Charlie said, "that came a month ago."

"What package? I don't see anything."

"It came through the post, and there it is in the top drawer of that silver-looking trunk, the trunk with the drawers. It's big, though, for the figure. It's got those little flaps all round the shoulders. The same sort of folds, only not as big. There's a parcel within a parcel."

"When did it come?" Jack asked.

"Just the other day, and it had these little marks around the throat... like this," he blew out a little circle of gray smoke, with a practiced hand, and another great circle, bigger this time, farther out to the right of the first, and then the circle again, and further out to the left of that.

"I'll get the box," Jack said.

He stood up, and, reaching for the box, stepped across the coffee table with the speed of a man putting on his trousers.

He pulled back the lock on the trunk and opened the lid. It was a very heavy box, which he lifted onto the coffee table and, looking inside, began to remove the contents. A beautiful pair of children's shoes—coats, in fact—came to light first. They were made of a delicate, beautiful, iridescent satin, trimmed with fine white ostrich feathers, and then a little green fur came into view, and after that, a tiny blue coat with a tiny red collar.

"Those..." Jack said, "are twins."

"Then these are Christmas things, Jack, and this-"

"Is a little baby frock," Jack cut him off, "a real one, with a little collar and hat. But look at this, Charlie, look at the look on that face. Look at that innocence. Look at the wonder in those innocent little eyes. There's no guile in the old world, Charlie.

You never lose that. Those eyes tell you that much. They tell me that much."

"I know that, and I know that you were never a weak man."

"I know that too," Jack said, "and it makes me proud to know it. But still—and you'll think this is silly, won't you—it breaks my heart to think that the old world still has that sort of power. It breaks my heart. It breaks it, and it won't go away."

"You're too sentimental, Jack."

"Too sentimental?"

"Pity."

"What would you know about that?"

"I'm just a thief, remember?"

"I'm going to burn it, Charlie," Jack said, looking at the coat, "that way, the *Other* must die. They have to die in that sense, don't they? The old world has to be destroyed, because all it's ever done is destroy things. It's a maelstrom, and it has to be swept away."

"How do you propose to do that?"

"I don't have to do anything. I'm going to enjoy watching. I'll laugh when it dies."

"I'm going to do that, I think I know what to do."

"You'll do what?"

"I'll kill them, Charlie."

"You want to kill them?"

"I'll take the baby clothes, and the frock, and the shoes. I'll take their knowledge and the stories I want to have, and I'll burn all that, and then I'll come home."

"You'll kill the 'Other,' you mean? He's a symbol, Jack; but he's not *the* symbol. The symbols don't live, they are things to be used, not destroyed, not torn out of their context. And now there is a new context for all of these symbols. If I destroy them, there will be a hole in the middle of their universe. All will have to react. They will have to change."

"And when they change, then what will you do?"

"Then I'll change. The world will change. I will be changed. And then the world will change again. And again. And again."

"You're going to have to kill the others, too."

"I don't think so, Jack."

They sat in silence for a while after that.

The merlon blocked the setting sun. A long shadow fell across Jack, taking him from the streets of London to the wards of Bedlam.

Charlie was waiting for him on the street now:

"What's up?" He asked.

"The real reason I wanted you here, Charlie, is that I think I'm getting closer to what you're talking about. I mean, about the Other."

Charlie regarded him quizzically: "The Other?"

"If you're right about the transformation, I have to think that this Other is a metaphor, not a real person. But when I'm thinking about him, I think of him. And now I think I might be close enough to be able to face him down."

"If you really are, that's not even the point."

"The point is, I think I might be able to kill him, but I have to be close."

"The point," Charlie continued, "is that if you are close, the Other will smell it, Jack. The real threat to their universe is that the stories you take away will be more and more powerful than the fiction they have. They might attack us. They might hunt us. For a story, for a myth. That's the problem, isn't it?"

"It's one thing for me, Charlie, ut's something else for other people. This isn't just about the Other, is it?"

Charlie's mouth twitched into a snarl. He was still holding a toy gun.

"Don't worry," said Jack, "it's only a story. I'm not going to let it bite me in the ass."

"For a good story, Jack, a bitten ass would be a good thing. A threat to the core of the universe."

Jack touched the forefinger of his right hand to the forefinger of his left hand and spoke:

"I see... so, killing the Other would be... how can I put this?"

"Justified," said Charlie.

"What?"

"The story, Jack, your narrative. Death can be justified."

"Good."

"You need to ask yourself one question."

"What?"

"Why?"

"Why?" Jack shook his head, "no."

"You need to ask yourself if it's worth the harm. If what you're doing isn't so important that you would actually do it?"

Jack took a deep breath. He closed his eyes. The shadows that had been gathering in the edges of his vision were still there, but they weren't forcing his eyes to close.

"If you could keep these stories from ever getting into the world, or if you could keep the impact from getting in here, would you do it?"

"No," Jack answered, "for a good story."

"Exactly."

Jack opened his eyes. Charlie's hand had retracted.

"I have a picture, Charlie."

Charlie leaned over: "A picture?"

"A picture.".

"Where?"

"Just now."

Charlie leaned down. He stared at the ground as his fingertip traced a familiar path in the grass.

"A picture, Jack? That's what you're holding in your hand?"

Jack raised his eyebrows.

"Is this a picture of a son, Jack?"

"It's not."

"A picture of a wife? A picture of a granddaughter? A picture of a daughter?"

"It's not a picture of me."

"Why not?"

"Because it's *you*."

"Is that so?"

"Yes."

Charlie's voice was tight, strained.

"I am," Charlie's voice shook for a moment, "I am the devil. I am a man who is without guilt or shame, and I am a man who will keep doing what he has to do, whether it's right or wrong, because it's what I have to do. And when it comes to right and wrong,—I'm a hypocrite."

"Yeah," said Jack.

"I'm holding a picture too, Jack."

"Yes, Charlie, it's a picture of us."

Charlie met his gaze: "I'm not finished."

"I was."

"It was a test."

"It was."

"I'm the devil," Charlie repeated.

"No," Jack said, "you're a man who says he's the devil."

"It's what people want to believe."

"It doesn't make it true."

"It's what people need to hear, and it's not even what I believe, and it's not what you believe. But what we believe matters less than what we do."

"You're a liar."

"I'm an enabler."

"That's a really gross way to talk, Charlie."

Charlie looked down. He went still:

"It's still a truth," he said, finally, "I can't really lie."

Jack could tell by his posture and the set of his shoulders, that his friend was hiding something. He took a deep breath and said: "We do what we want because we think we should, and we don't really need an excuse."

"That's the truth," said Charlie.

"Because we want it," Jack continued, "we want it badly enough that we ignore the facts. We ignore the consequences of what we're doing."

"I know."

"It's a hell of a way to live."

"I don't disagree. It's true. I know it's the truth."

"You wouldn't do it if it wasn't.".

"You make me feel like I should feel like I should feel guilty about it," Charlie said, "that I should feel ashamed. But I don't feel that way. I don't feel like I should feel guilty about what I'm doing."

Jack shrugged. He didn't either. In fact, the thought of guilt was a foreign one to him.

"It doesn't change what we're doing," Charlie added.

"And it doesn't change the truth of the matter," said Jack.

"Does it?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, I guess we don't have to fight about it anymore."

"You're right."

Jack and Charlie finished their coffee.

"Maybe you're right, Charllie."

"No, I'm not, but if it makes you feel better..."

"It does."

"Let's do it," Charlie said.

Jack nodded.

He took another long breath:

"Let's find the truth."

He grabbed Charlie's shoulder and together they walked back into the darkness.

F I N I S.

Infomration
about the first volume of The Canonical
Adventures of Jack & Charlie.

The original date of the publication of this book is anno MM.XX.II., whereas the crypto-updates, which took place over the course of two years, became finalized in anno MM.XX.IV. The chapters found on the following pages: 2, 15, 19, 27, 32, 43, and 52, can also be located in the three *Goofiest Encyclicals.* Certain errors in crediting have been corrected, in accordance with occulted necessities, along with other more usual errors, &c.

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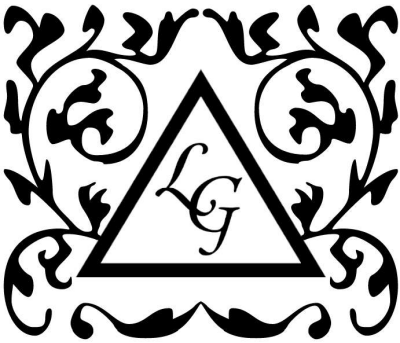

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MM.XX.II.